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‘ Oh, God, be merciful !’

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‘Oh, God, be merciful!’

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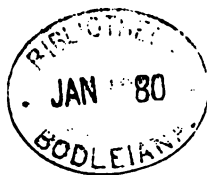
FRANK BLAKE THE TRAPPER.

A Tale for Boys.

BY

MRS. HARDY,

AUTHOR OF 'THE CASTAWAY'S HOME,' 'UP NORTH,' ETC.



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CONTENTS.

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. UNCLE BENJAMIN - - - - -	1
II. SANDY - - - - -	14
III. THE OCEAN QUEEN - - - - -	21
IV. THE 'JUNO' - - - - -	26
V. THE TORNADO - - - - -	42
VI. THE NEW WORLD - - - - -	48
VII. THE PRAIRIES - - - - -	64
VIII. A HUNTER'S UPS AND DOWNS - - - - -	78
IX. BUFFALO - - - - -	85
X. AN ANXIOUS MOMENT - - - - -	91
XI. 'WESTWARD HO!' - - - - -	104
XII. CEDAR CREEK - - - - -	110
XIII. TRAPPING - - - - -	119
XIV. A TRAPPER'S BOUNDS - - - - -	130
XV. BEAVER PARADISE - - - - -	138
XVI. CHRISTMAS AT CEDAR CREEK - - - - -	151
XVII. PABLO RANCHE - - - - -	172
XVIII. HOPE - - - - -	183

CHAPTER	PAGE
XIX. THE GREY WOLF-SKIN - - - -	194
XX. THE WOLF-HUNTED - - - -	203
XXI. WOMAN'S FAITH - - - -	214
XXII. THE FOREST CITADEL - - - -	225
XXIII. FRESH TRIALS - - - -	242
XXIV. THE APACHE CHIEF - - - -	250
XXV. THE RACE - - - -	264

FRANK BLAKE THE TRAPPER.

CHAPTER I.

UNCLE BENJAMIN.

'Be cheerful, wipe thine eyes ;
Some falls are means the happier to arise.'
Cymbeline.

THE room was old fashioned, but handsome. It was panelled and ceiled with dark oak, whose polished surface reflected in a thousand gleams and sparkles the bright ruddy glow of the wood fire which burned on the hearth, and did its best to impart an air of cosy comfort to the chill foggy twilight of a November afternoon. Comfortable, however, as the room was, two of its three inmates were not at all so, while the third, who looked quite at his ease, had a somewhat ungainly appearance, and a severity of aspect and demeanour little calculated to inspire confidence or conciliate affection in others. He was a long lathy man with a large head thatched with a great fell of coarse iron-grey hair, his eyes were large, prominent, and of a faded blue, while their expression was rendered almost sinister by a very noticeable squint ; his mouth was wide, with thin lips, and there was a constant nervous twitching of the upper lip which added to the unpleasant effect of his whole appearance.

'What are your plans, may I ask, Frank ?' he said, in a

loud, harsh voice, which jarred on the ears like the rasping of a rusty old saw.

The individual addressed, a fine, handsome, fair-haired young fellow, started violently, and then muttered, in an embarrassed tone :

‘I—uncle—I—what are my plans, did you say?’

‘Yes, I said, what—are—your—plans—pray, if it is not too great a liberty to ask?’ emphasising each word by enunciating it with the most slow and awful distinctness.

‘My plans—I—I am afraid I have not any,’ said the young man recklessly, tossing nervously back the fair hair from his brow.

‘This blow has been so awfully sudden,’ said the third member of the trio, a slender, faded woman, dressed in widow’s weeds; and as she spoke she lifted, for the first time, from behind her handkerchief, a pale quivering face. ‘I really, Brother Benjamin——’ but here her heart failed her, and a sudden gush of tears streamed from her eyes.

‘This is the worst of having to discuss business matters with a woman,’ said Mr. Benjamin Blake. ‘Feelings are all very well in their way, but there is a time for everything. Sister Sarah, if Joshua had done his duty, and as he would marry, have taken care to provide for you and my hopeful nephew here, I would have had nothing to say, but as it is——’

The widow heaved a long, deep, gurgling sigh, choked with tears, ‘Poor Joshua thought—thought—thought he had provided for us,’ she gasped.

‘By investing all his money in that rascally bank,’ quoth Uncle Benjamin, turning upon her with a very fierce countenance. ‘You will tell me next, I suppose, that at his age he should not have known better than to put all his eggs into one basket; and then, as if that were not enough, here is this fine young man, with the thews and sinews of a Hercules, literally not able to do an honest hand’s turn for his bread, as entirely and completely helpless as any girl.’

'Frank has been a good boy to me,' said the poor woman, slipping, as she spoke, her small white meagre hand into her son's broad brown palm. 'Frank has been a good boy to me.'

'Humph!' said the old man. 'I suppose that means that he was for ever dangling at your apron strings, ready to wind a skein of silk for you, or hold a clew of worsted, or pick up a knitting needle. In my young days, a stout young fellow would have thought black burning shame to have idled away his time at home in a life of indulgent ease, at the best an incumbrance upon his parents.'

'Frank was never idle,' said the widow, with a fresh burst of tears; 'and then there was only himself; it did not seem as if there would ever be any necessity for him to work.'

'Fiddlesticks, madam. I have no patience with these pernicious notions of the dignity of idleness. Work is the true birthright of humanity. It is the bounden duty of every man to work either with his head or his hands; but Frank you say, was always busy, only a good-hearted idle sort of a boy. I have heard you make that excuse for him at least a score of times, Sister Sarah, but we shall see. First he had a good education, that I know; then he was sent to France and Germany that he might learn French and German thoroughly—goodness knows for what, unless it were that he might rate a gamekeeper, or hallo to a dog, in one or other of these tongues, and finally, as a finish off, he had instructions from a private tutor. Then my poor brother Joshua, who, easy as he was, was not quite a fool, wished him to think about a profession, and he chose the army, of course; but he was too young for the Horse Guards, and so he went into the Militia, and learned his drill, or did not learn it; there, it's all one to me. It is a year, I believe, now, since the regiment was disembodied, and since then, I suppose, he has been working hard at loafing about, and hunting, and shooting, and fishing, eh, Frank; that's about it, is it not?'

'Yes, it is,' said the young man; 'and I wish from the bottom of my heart that I had been more industrious, and so

have been in a better position now to lighten this load of wretchedness for my poor mother.'

'Eh! eh! say ye that, lad,' quoth Uncle Benjie. 'They are the most sensible words I ever heard you speak in my life. Come, come, I am heartily glad to hear them; they have relieved my worst fear, which was that I had gotten a born fool for my nephew. I have no objections to help a man that will help himself, quite the contrary, and so as that's your way of thinking, I'll give you a chance to make a man of yourself yet.'

'Oh, Uncle Benjie, how good of you,' said poor Mrs. Blake, eagerly. There was a wild gleam of hope in her dim tear-sodden eyes, and a bright flush of expectation on her thin faded cheeks, and for a moment it almost seemed as if she were about to throw her arms round the neck of the grim old family mentor, who appeared to dread something of the kind himself, for he pushed his chair hastily back, and said testily:

'You had better hear what I am going to do before you go into any of your ecstasies. I am not going to settle so much a year upon Frank that he may have splendid runs with the North Ribbleton hounds, persecuting a wretched beast that has ten times more sense and mother wit than he has yet shown; but I am going to offer him a post in my counting-house—a subordinate one, of course, at first, but just such as I began with myself.'

'He would not have to work very hard, I suppose, and he would soon be rich—merchants make money so quickly,' said poor Mrs. Blake, in a quavering tone.

'He would have to work hard,' said Uncle Benjamin, emphatically. 'He would have to pore all day over invoices, day-books, journals, and ledgers; he would not become rich soon—not, at least, if he were honest—and what is more, his promotion would depend, like that of the most friendless clerk in my office, entirely upon his own industry, assiduity, and intelligence. I have seen the disastrous effects of a contrary

course of conduct too often exemplified in the experience of other men, to risk trying it in my own business. Now, Frank, I have made my offer, what do you say to it?' and as he spoke he stood up.

'My dear sir,' said Frank, 'you mean most kindly, I don't doubt, and I am grateful to you for thinking so well of me as your offer implies, but—you see—but——' and after some hesitation and floundering about for a word, he fairly broke down, as if he were altogether unable to clothe what he had to say in appropriate language. Uncle Benjie, however, ascribed his hesitation to another cause; reseating himself, with a frown as black as thunder, he muttered:

'The old accursed weakness; he cannot make up his mind to anything. Brother Joshua has much to answer for.'

Mrs. Blake hereupon sobbed aloud, and then there was a dead silence, which became every moment more awkward. At last Frank, in desperation, came out with: 'It would be no good my going into your counting-house, Uncle Benjie. You could never make a merchant of me.'

'I'll warrant no,' said the old man, angrily interrupting him. 'It's ill making a silk purse out of a sow's ear. What shall I do with you then?—give Lachlan Maclauchlan, the duke's gamekeeper, some bit sma' premium to take you for one of his gillies, eh?'

There was another awful pause, and then the poor fellow blurted out: 'You are right, uncle, it is all I am fit for; but I have not been so thoughtless as you imagine. Since my poor father's death, and this bank calamity has reduced us to such dire straits, I have been thinking constantly of how I may at least relieve my dear mother of the encumbrance of my presence, if I can in no other way help her.'

Mrs. Blake made an incoherent, choking protest, in which the words, 'Dearest, best of boys' were alone clearly audible.

Uncle Benjie cleared his throat, crossed one long leg over the other. 'Gammon,' he muttered; 'but I shall take care it does not come over me.'

'Uncle,' struck in Frank, impelled by despair, 'if you could only believe that I don't want anything from you, you would understand me better; a gamekeeper's life, as you say, is perhaps all I am fit for, and I have thought of something analogous to it; I have made up my mind to go out to the Far West as a trapper.'

'Eh, you have, have you? Well, it's the end of most ne'er-do-weels to be shipped off to one or other of the colonies, with a few pounds in their pockets, to make their way or perish where nobody at least knows anything about them.'

'Frank! Frank! do you wish to break my crushed heart?' almost screamed his mother. 'Oh, boy! boy! do you think it is a possible thing for a widowed mother to part with her only son?'

'Not easy, darling,' he said, caressing her fondly, 'but possible; and it will not be for long, not for long dear, and I will come back to you, God helping me, a son that you may be proud of.'

'I have always been proud of you, Frank. You have always been my good, true, honourable, manly-hearted boy!'

'Humph!' said Uncle Benjie, conveying into the ejaculation as much contemptuous scorn as most men would have found it possible to put even into a long sentence. 'But I am thankful it is settled one way or another. It is dinner-time, I think; I never allow my dinner-hour to be postponed by anything or anybody. It is as much as a man's life is worth to trifle with such an important matter, so with your leave, sister, we will adjourn to the dining-room.'

There a comfortable old-fashioned repast was served, which was eaten with the sharp sauce of Uncle Benjie's grumbling criticisms. Everyone and everything he found fault with, and as Frank did not answer him at all, and Mrs. Blake ceased after a while to make her faint excuses, which were not even listened to, he worked himself at last into such a fit of rage, that he ceased to be intelligible, and went off sputtering and fizzing like a rocket to his own room.

'Oh, Frank, you have offended him for ever!' sighed the widow.

'No mother, dear, I *have* not. He has disliked me so much ever since I was a tiny mite of a fellow, that there was no kindness or love for me in his heart to offend. After all, I have not much claim upon him.'

'I am not sure of that; your father always liked to think, Frank, that you would succeed to his fortune, which must be very large.'

'I am not going to speculate as to whether it is large or small—I don't expect any of it; and, as I said before, I don't feel as if I had much of a claim upon the crusty old fellow—he was only a half-brother of my poor father's. But as he is not the most agreeable subject either for thought or conversation, let us dismiss him from our minds, dear, while his absence permits us that luxury, and let us have a nice cosy chat about my prospects, and the fortune I am going to bring you from the land of wolves and beavers.'

'But the Red Indians, Frank,' said poor Mrs. Blake, in a terrified gasp, 'have you thought of them? I shall always be dreading that you are being eaten by them.'

'That will be very stupid of you then, mother dear. The Red Indians, I assure you, are not cannibals, and it is not one, two, or even ten of them that will frighten your Frank. There, is not that braggadocio for you with a vengeance? Had you any idea that I was such a hero?'

She smiled for sole answer, and her fond eyes rested on his face with a lingering caressing glance, as if the very sight of it filled her with confidence and hope, and indeed it was a countenance well fitted to inspire both feelings. Despite the purposelessness of his previous life, it was as energetic and self-reliant as it was vigorous and sun-burnt, and his eyes, bright and blue, had an honest straight-forward look in them which carried a conviction of his rectitude to the gazer's heart.

His own heart, as he tried to while his mother's thoughts

away from the uncertainties of his future, and fix them upon the possible good things in store for him, felt as heavy as lead within his breast, but he would not let himself give way to despondency. He knew how often in the weary months and years to come she would sit brooding over him and his surroundings, not reading much, not trying to acquire new information on the subject, but going back to what he had said, to what he had thought. Weak, useless fellow as he was in the estimation of his uncle and many other people, he was all the world to her, and it was the consciousness that his future would ever afterwards wear in her mind the complexion, bright or dark, which he was able to give it, that made him make a supreme effort to talk lightly and cheerfully about what he was going to do.

He was quite pleased, he said, with the idea of roughing it a little; his life might be toilsome and adventurous, but he would no doubt find it mighty pleasant.' At last, as he talked on, he began himself to believe in the possibilities of his own future good fortune; and his mother, who had at first listened to him in pensive amazement, found something so infectious in the sanguine buoyancy of his anticipations, that she began also to smile and hope, and the evening which had begun so sadly ended tolerably pleasantly for both of them.

'And you know, my love,' said the poor woman, 'there is no need for too great a hurry; we will think about it and look around us, and I must buy your outfit for you. Thank God I have still something left for that.'

'Mother, it goes to my heart to take a single farthing of the miserable pittance from you; I will rather—yes—I will rather bend my pride—what has a poor beggar like me to do with pride?—and ask a loan from Uncle Benjie.'

'No, no, Frank; he is too unkind—indeed he is; besides, as I said before, there is no hurry.' And then she kissed him and went tranquilly to bed, feeling that it would be possible to defer the evil day by at least several months of preparation. In this, however, she counted without her host—at least with-

out Uncle Benjie, who, in this crisis of household ruin, had suddenly become a potential influence in the family.

When he appeared at the breakfast-table next morning, he was unusually silent, but as his manner was the slightest thing in the world more conciliatory, Mrs. Blake, who had a natural desire to be sociable, thought she would make an attempt at conversation, so she began timidly :

‘You will be sorry to hear, Brother Benjamin, that our neighbour Mr. Dapperwit has had an attack of softening of the brain.’

‘I would be sorry to hear it, sister, if I could believe it possible,’ quoth Uncle Benjie, taking an enormous silver snuffbox out of the side-pocket of his coat, and rapping it ominously with his knuckles, ‘but it is a sheer impossibility, a mystification of the doctors—he never had any brain to soften.’

Mrs. Blake gave a gurgling gasp, as if she were trying to swallow the physiological difficulties of the case, and they had choked her back into silence, which she did not again try to break, and Uncle Benjie went on with his breakfast, which was spread in the ample old-fashioned Scotch style. He was at all times an indifferently good pecker, and after he had tried all the various items, demolished a pile of Finnen haddocks, reduced a grouse pie to a hideous ruin, devoured at least a quarter of a goodly mutton ham, polished off a basket of oat cakes, and cleared away a plate of wheat-meal scones, he looked round him with the air of a satisfied ogre, blew his nose with a report which resounded over the house, and asked blandly, ‘Master Frank, is your portmanteau packed?’

If a bomb-shell had fallen over that cosy breakfast-table it could scarcely have produced a more disturbing effect. Mrs. Blake rose, put her hands to her face, and with the hot tears streaming between her fingers, left the room.

‘Now,’ said Uncle Benjie, ‘we can talk comfortably. Is your portmanteau packed, Frank Blake?’

‘No, it is not, uncle.’

'I trust,' said the old man very sternly, 'that there is to be no more of the miserable shilly-shallying which has been the curse of your life. Were you in earnest in what you said to me last night, or were you not?'

'I was in earnest, as thoroughly in earnest as a man can be, and I hope that upon the whole, you do not disapprove of my resolution, sir?'

'Disapprove of it? no, not I, indeed. I think nature evidently intended you for a huntsman or a gamekeeper, and as pride, I suppose, will not suffer you to take one of these honest situations here, I really don't see what you can do better, and as some outfit will be necessary, I am ready to come down with what is needful, if you will promise me to start to-morrow morning. I have a ship to sail for New York on Thursday, and that will just suit you.'

'Perfectly,' said the young fellow, 'and I would like to thank you for your kindness, for indeed it has lifted a load from my heart.'

'If you can really be grateful,' quoth Uncle Benjie, as ungracious as ever, 'prove it, and repay my loan with interest.'

'I will,' said Frank, 'if I have to work my fingers to the bone to do it.'

'Aye, aye, fine words—fine words,' muttered the old man, trundling off in the direction of the kitchen regions, where, in groping his way along a dark passage, he popped one of his long legs into a pail of scalding water, in which the dairymaid was preparing to wash out the churn, and thereupon uttered such a yell that he soon had the entire household—cook, housemaid, gardener, groom, and the offending dairymaid to boot—around him, and was scolding them all in no measured terms for idle untidy sluts and malapert hussies.

'Oh, what is to be done? What is to be done?' cried Mrs. Blake, as she ran forward, wringing her helpless hands. 'Brother Benjamin, are you in great pain?'

What Brother Benjamin said in reply cannot be recorded,

but it flustered the poor little woman to such a degree that, to use her own words, 'it put her out so completely, that she could not tell any more than a baby what should be done ;' but if she was at the end of her resources, her staff were only at the beginning of theirs.

'If he were to drink say a matter o' four tumblers of this fine wormwood water,' said cook, producing a stone jar of portentous dimensions, 'it would keep doon the inflammation.'

'Na, na,' shouted the gardener, a huge Herculean fellow ; 'trail him to the roasting-jack and tie him to it, and then set himself as close to the bars o' the grate as he can bear it—there's naething like ane fire for drawing out anither.'

'Stand oot o' my way,' shouted the groom, a little round, rosy, active man, 'here's a sheep's head Girzy the cook's been singeing ; it's been forgotten in the hurry, and it's amaisht red het—I'll bring fire to him,' and suiting the action to the word, he caught up the tongs, and seizing the head, advanced towards the patient, who had become speechless with rage and pain, but who, at sight of this portentous battering-ram, recovered in a trice all his lost energies.

'Get away from me, you murdering maniac !' he shrieked ; 'and there, take that,' and he dealt him such a kick with his sound leg, that the man of whips and spurs went over sprawling on his back, and the smoking head, discharged as from a catapult, fizzed across the whole breadth of the kitchen, and hitting fat Girzy the cook in the stomach, dropped her like a shot. Nor did the casualties stop here ; Uncle Benjie had no doubt routed his adversary, but the effort was too much for his injured limb ; it gave way just in the moment of victory, and back he rattled with a crash and smash as if he had drawn a whole china shop about his ears. The noise was tremendous, but was only caused by his having clutched in his fall at the tray with the breakfast dishes. It was more detrimental to his own comfort that he fell back into a large can of cream, which flowed all around him, sticky and thick

and sour, rousing the shrill wail of Irish Biddy the dairy-maid.

‘Och, murther, the crame, the beautiful crame! and it’s Novimber, too, and not a dhrop more to be had for love or money, shure it’s the hoigth of bad loock. Och, wirra, wirra! the ould masther’s drowning. Help, Masther Frank, help! yer uncle’s drowning in the crame can.’

And in truth there was some ground for Biddy’s conjecture. Worthy Mr. Blake lay prone along the floor, his long legs kicking convulsively and throwing up unctuous showers of thick clotted cream, while his head was lost to view, firmly embedded in what was left of the cream-can, from which issued, as from behind a visor, a succession of hollow choking gurgles, each followed by a long-drawn gasping expiration.

Frank, who had just appeared upon the scene, lost no time in responding to Biddy’s piteous appeal, and with the gardener’s help, Uncle Benjie was raised and carefully placed in a chair, and every effort was made to divest him of his strange helmet, but in vain: the can would not be coaxed off, and no moderate degree of force could remove it. At this juncture the fallen groom raised himself, and with a vindictive twinkle in his eyes, made a handsome offer.

‘Jist let Jock there haud his legs, and let me get a pull at it, and I’ll gang bail I’ll get it aff in five minutes at the langest.’

Here a fearful concert of coughing, wheezing, sneezing and gurgling issued from the bosom of the can, and Biddy set up a shriek of—

‘Och, och! he’s suffocated and drowned entirely—he might as well be smothering in the Bog of Allan. Shure and I know, don’t I, what kind of crame it is—one could amost stand upon it.’

Here Mrs. Blake’s mild quaver again made itself heard, for the first time since she had been so roughly silenced: ‘Brother Benjamin,’ she pensively sighed, ‘I hope you are not very uncomfortabla.’

It was a heaping of the metaphorical coals of forgiveness upon the hardened old monster's head, but if she could have devised any means of freeing it from its present uncomfortable headgear, it would have been more to the purpose.

'Quick, mother—Biddy, any of you,' sung out Frank. 'It won't come off any way—I can cooper it; bring me a hammer.'

'Eh, Maister Frank, tak care what ye're aboot; ye'll knock his brains oot,' said Girzy, whom nobody had had time to attend to, and who now struggled up to a sitting posture.

'I will take as good care as I can, Girzy, but something must be done to relieve him, and I have tried everything else.'

He then made a pause, and looked at the legs; they were quite quiet, and from that he argued that the involuntary wearer of the earthenware helmet judged favourably of the new project for his liberation.

'I am sure I hope it won't hurt him,' he muttered, and seizing the hammer, he set to work with a will. It was by no means an easy job, for the can was very thick, and he dared only exert a moderate degree of strength, while at every stroke he gave, Mrs. Blake gave a faint little scream, and the housemaid a louder one, and the cook a louder one still, while Biddy topped the concert with a shriek so ear-piercing and shrill that it sounded for all the world like the far-reaching Irish keen, and then, in the midst of all the uproar, the cream can suddenly split in two, and there was the dear old gentleman sitting in the middle of the floor, as pretty a sight as could well be seen in a long summer's day, rubbing the cream from his face with all the composure in life, and glaring round with an expression which plainly showed that he was in a fine fizz of a temper.

'Brother Benjamin,' said Mrs. Blake, advancing placidly, 'I hope you don't feel very ill after all this?'

'Zounds, madam, how can I feel well?'

'I mean, I hope you don't feel worse than was to be expected.'

‘Madam,’ said Brother Benjamin, slewing himself slowly round, but determined not again to lose his self-control, ‘madam, if I had been Brother Joshua, which heaven be praised I was not, nor ever could be, I—I—I—I would have bolted, madam. Come here, Frank, and you, you gardener fellow there, and help me to my room.’

Thither, in a short time, the whole household were summoned, to attend to his numerous wants and be thoroughly scolded into the bargain, except the groom, who was sent to the nearest town to fetch Dr. Pillbolter, and Frank, who, regarding his nepotal duties as ended for the time, packed his portmanteau and strolled out to take a last look at the home of his fathers, which he was about so soon to leave for ever.

CHAPTER II.

SANDY.

‘Courage and comfort. All shall yet go well.’
Romeo and Juliet.

OVERWHELMED by a complication of feelings, he was surveying with deep dejection the old grey mansion house, snugly set down in a small but well-wooded park, through which flowed a bright, sparkling, brawling brook, every turn and winding of which reminded him of the happy careless days of his boyhood. Instinctively he turned to take a last look of the hazel copses in which he had so often hunted in spring for bird’s nests, and in autumn gathered bright, brown, shiny treasures in the shape of nuts and acorns.

‘I wonder if any boy will ever be so happy here again as I have been,’ he muttered. ‘As for me, I shall never see it again, never.’

'Dinna be ower sure o' that, yer honour; I'se warrant mair broken ships have come to land. And sae yer honour is gaun abroad, I'm tauld, to push yer fortune?'

'Yes, Sandy, I am, and very soon too; I leave this to-morrow morning.'

'Aye, sae I was tauld. Weel, I am thinking yer honour wull need some douce honest lad like me to take care o' ye.'

'What do you mean, Sandy?' half resentfully.

'Eh, now! what sould I mean but jist to be yer honour's *valet de changle*, to brush your claes, and see that ye are a' snod and in order, and aiblins to take charge o' yer fowling-pieces, ance I get used to them, whilk I canna say I am at this present.'

In spite of his depression Frank Blake burst into a hearty laugh.

'Why, Sandy,' he said, 'did I not tell you scarcely a minute since that I was going out to the Far West to push my fortune; why, man, I am as poor as you are, and even if I were as rich as Cræsus, no fellow in the world could have less need of a *valet de chambre*.'

A look of blank amazement spread over Sandy's broad freckled face. He first opened his eyes very wide and then his mouth, shifted from one leg on to the other, rubbed his rough shock of sandy hair, and then, as if he had suddenly found the inspiration of which he stood in need, came out with:

'Aweel, it dis'na matter. I am no sae bound to the plack and bawbee pairt o' the business as a' that, and nae doot when yer honour's fortune is made ye'll see that the wage o' the puir lad that followed ye ower the seas is in a manner decently made up.'

'Follow me over the seas! What do you mean, Sandy? Have you taken leave of your senses, or have I lost the faculty of hearing aright?'

'Na, yer honour's as gleg at the uptake as ever you were; I mean jist what I said, to gang wi' you owe the seas, with

wages or without them. My heart is jist fair broken wi' thae innerly mains o' Ballingray ; I hae held the pleugh stilts amang them for sax lang years, as yer honour kens weel, and it's a dour cauld kind o' grund, little to be made o't barring the coughs and rheumatics, and sae I hae e'en made up my mind to leave it and follow yer honour in search o' fortune.'

'But, Sandy, I cannot in this way take advantage of your disinterested friendship for me. I cannot allow you to sacrifice your humble but safe and respectable position for the dangers and uncertainties of the career I have chosen.'

'I am asking nae man's leave to settle my ain way o' life ; I am nae man's servant as yet,' said Sandy, doggedly. 'This call is something o' the suddentest, but it's no ower sudden for me. I have been thinking o' flitting any time for the last sax years back, and as weel sune as syne. And sae yer honour need say nae mair aboot it, for if ye were to speak for a hundred years ye wouldna persuade me.'

'But I have nothing to give you, Sandy. If you come with me, you have absolutely nothing to expect.'

'I'll take my chance o' that, yer honour, as I said before.'

'And there is your old mother, Sandy. How can you leave her unprovided for?'

'I'm no leaving her unprovided for,' said the obdurate Sandy. 'Sae dinna ye fash your head aboot the auld wife, Maister Frank ; she's been an eident thrifty quean, although I say it that may be souldna, and she has gotten a bit pose o' her ain weel rowed up in an auld stocking fit—it's no a bad kind o' bank, though the interest's no muckle, but the risk, barring thae gangrel beggars and the stravaging Irish land-loupers, is but sma, and sae the auld wife will no want her bicker o' brose, and a wheen kail now and again, and a pickle tea to raise her speerits, and the auld maister he has as gude as promised, that when the ledly gangs to the dower-house at auld Ballingry, my mother shall gang tae, and keep the porter's lodge at the gate.'

'But my mother is not going to the dower-house, Sandy. You must be mistaken.'

'That I canna weel be,' persisted Sandy, 'for the auld maister tauld me sae himsel. He is a dour carle, Maister Frank, but his bark is waur than his bite. His heart is soond yet, and that's an extraordinar' thing to me, for he is in a manner, as ane might say, plowtering amang money frae morning till night. And auld Dr. Context—ye'll mind Dr. Context weel, Maister Frank—used to say that money made the heart sae hard, that a clour wi' the heaviest sledge-hammer in the warld wad'na soften it. Eh, he was a douce pawkie body that; and wi' nae ill will to speak o' to the money when it came in his ain gait, he drove the hardest bargains, they say, in the hale Strath.'

'But, Sandy, what will your mother do without you? How will she bear your absence?'

'Troth, I dinna ken; she'll hae to thole it, jist like her betters, puir body. Mony's the time, I'se warrant, that she will waste her auld een wi' greeting for me, as she sits by the ingle side, but for that matter the leddy winna be muckle better, Maister Frank, eh?'

'I am afraid not; and so you have made up your mind thoroughly to this rash step, Sandy?'

'Troth and I have, and blythe I am to get the chance; for I'm just weary, as I said before, o' this sour saft grund. And yet what for should I ban the grund?—it's as the Almighty made it, and I'll gang far, I'se warrant, before I see onything sae bonny as the holm fields o' Ballingray. Oh, Maister Frank, it's no that! Ye'll mind Maggie Gray, Jamie Gray the smith's dochter, at Smiddy Hill?'

'I do,' said Frank, recalling, but not without some difficulty, the bouncing figure and bonny face of a rustic coquette, whose charms had been fatal to a host of humble woers, among whom was poor Sandy Buchan.

'Weel,' said the poor fellow, 'she was proclaimed on Sunday, and she's to be married on Friday next to lang

Tam Finklatter ; and now ye ken, Maister Frank, the sair need I hae to pit the seas between me and him, and ye winna say my prayer nay.'

'No, Sandy, I will not ; so you must be ready to start with me to-morrow morning. My uncle does not like delays, and perhaps he is right.'

'I winna say he's wrang,' said the rustic Romeo ; 'he's but a daidling coward body that canna face a bit glint o' trial like a man. A tough job is best dune at ance, and sae the sooner the better for me, and I'll e'en gang and tell oor auld mither it's a' settled.

Frank Blake lingered for a few minutes longer, and then returned to the house. It was beginning to get dark, and there was no light except that of the fire in the panelled oak parlour, where his mother usually sat of an evening. The door was ajar, and as he entered softly, he thought at first the room was empty, and then filial reverence and respect held him motionless. His mother was there : he could just see the slight outline of her figure in her familiar chair beside the fire ; her hands were pressed to her eyes, and she was praying in a low solemn voice, broken with sobs :

'O Lord ! bless and preserve my boy, and keep him good and true and pure ; and if it be Thy holy will, let me see him again.'

'Mother !' cried the young man, rushing impetuously forward, 'I want you to hear me promise that I will try, God helping me, to be all you would wish. Whatever happens to me, whether fortune or misfortune be in store for me, I will try always to have the courage to do what is right.'

For sole answer she threw her frail arms round him, and sobbed and cried as if her heart would break ; and he, strong young fellow as he was, was as nearly as possible overcome too, when irrepressible Uncle Benjie came to the rescue with his unfailing selfishness and never-ending wants.

'Eh, mem !' cried fat Girzy the cook, bursting panting and breathless into the room ; 'eh, mem ! ye maun come up directly to the old maister ; he's graining fit to melt a heart o' stane,

and asking betimes if there's onything fit to eat. Set him up, and me made him wi' my ain hands as bonny a bicker o' water-gruel as ye could wish to see. What can an auld feckless body like him want wi' flesh meat in his trouble? But ye maun e'en gang to him, mem, or we'se a pay for it, for he's routing like a cow in a fremd loaning."

'It is hard, Frank,' said poor Mrs. Blake, drying her eyes, 'to lose this last sad hour.'

'And yet, mother,' said the young man, 'what good does it do to either of us?—it only makes our aching hearts the weaker, and we have need to strengthen them.'

'And it is my duty to be kind and affectionate to him, for Joshua's sake,' said Mrs. Blake, rising. 'He is no doubt suffering much pain, and that is apt to make one unreasonable.'

The railway had not yet found its way into the broken woodland glades that surrounded the old mansion-house of Ballingray, so early next morning Frank Blake and his humble friend, Sandy Buchan, got upon a coach which rejoiced in the high sounding title of the Queen's Fly, and drove away in the darkness of the winter morning through a country which soon became waste and wild. High heathy hills overhung the road, merging into a wide desolate tract of level moorland, as barren and waste as any Sahara, impressing the mind with a sense of loneliness and desolation which was if anything deepened by the chill gloom of the misty November morning. Both the travellers were on the top of the coach, and neither of them spoke for a long time, until Sandy Buchan, pointing to a thicket of straggling alder, said :

'Ye'll mind the bonny Deneburn wood, Maister Frank, and the hawk's nest we harried in yon big fir-tree, and what ye said then : "We maun set a stiff heart to a stey brae," said ye, and I'se warrant we may take the word to oursells now. It's aye gude to keep up a stout heart—naebody can tell what will happen ; as broken a ship as you or me either has come to land yet, and as for Maggie Gray, she's like the lave o'

them, and I'll 'een whistle her doon the wind—there's as gude fish in the sea, I'se warrant, as ever came oot o' it.'

'In one respect I am more fortunate than you, Sandy—I have no one to leave behind me except my poor mother.'

'Troth then,' said Sandy, with alacrity, 'I may say the same. Saving and excepting the auld wife hersel', wha hae I to leave ahint me? I hae ower grit a heart to be behadden for sae muckle as a kind wish to anither man's joe. Na, let her gang, and as for oor mither, sair as she grat, puir body, she kenned it behooved me to gang, for she's a douce dainty prudent auld wife, sae she gied me her blessing, and charged me to be gude and true to yer honour, and to keep mysel' clear o' papishers and pagans, whilk I promised to do. Hech, sirs, that's a sifting wind, mortal bad for the rheumatics; I'll e'en gie that auld wife on the back seat the lend o' my new plaid; she's cowering as if the snell blast blew right through and through her, and my heart warms to her for oor mother's sake.'

Suiting the action to the word, Sandy put his plaid, with much care, round the old woman's shoulders, and had what he afterwards described as a very douce and sensible claver with her, which served materially to lighten several weary miles of his journey.

CHAPTER III.

THE OCEAN QUEEN.

'A wet sheet and a flowing sea,
A wind that follows fast,
And fills the white and rustling sail,
And bends the gallant mast,

ALLAN CUNNINGHAM.

ON arriving at their journey's end, they found that the *Ocean Queen* had finished taking in her cargo, and was ready to sail, so they went on board at once. The ship was a good one, and carried a crew of twelve able-bodied seamen, four ordinary seamen, and three apprentices. There were no passengers except themselves, and as the weather was squally, and sometimes freshened into what even the sailors allowed to be a gale, they were not for the first few days in a condition to observe much of the curious little new world in which they found themselves. Sandy, in particular, had a terrible time of it; he had a firm presentiment that a storm was brewing, in which the vessel would in all probability go to the bottom, and he was determined, he said, not to be drowned like a rat in its hole, so he kept on deck through the roughest of the weather, and, with the social instincts of his class, soon made friends with the crew, and especially with the cook, who seemed to him to have certain very desirable social advantages. He could smoke in his galley whenever he chose, and even extend the like privilege to a friend. He was free also to slumber peacefully all night in the best bunk of the forecabin, blissfully unconscious of the existence or claims of port or star-board watches.

In a few days the weather moderated a little, and the uncomfortable sensations of the landlubbers began to wear off. Frank Blake came on board, as well as his factotum Sandy,

but he did not have anything like such a good time of it. The captain, an elderly, hard-featured man, seemed to grudge every word he spoke, he was so sparing of them, and a lonely feeling of desolateness often came over Frank, which he was ashamed even to acknowledge to himself. As for Sandy, having recovered confidence in himself and his internal arrangements, he declared loudly that he was 'amaist famished wi' vexation and the cauld sea wind,' and fell on the viands set before him in such a masterly fashion as to astonish his friend the cook and dismay the ancient captain, who surveyed him at his congenial task with an aspect so dejected, that one would have fancied that he was afraid that the huge appetite of this Scotch cormorant, as he dubbed poor Sandy, would create a famine in the ship.

The object of his sharp and scrutinising glances was, however, in no way disquieted by them; he took his meals as they came with stolid equanimity, and spent, as usual, most of his time on deck, where he was one day greatly interested and surprised by observing, as he thought, a flock of pigeons circling round the ship.

'Eh, mon!' he cried to one of his friends among the crew. 'Look here. There's a wheem bonny doos as ever I saw.'

'Shure, then, and I wish you joy of them,' said the man. 'They bode us nothing but ill-luck. They are Mother Carey's chickens, and I never knew anything but mischief come out of the brood of them. We'll have it hot and strong soon.'

'A merry capful of wind, nothing more, Dan,' said another of the men. 'Why, messmate, you are always looking out for squalls.'

'Looks as if it would blow hard,' muttered the chief mate, going forward, where he was soon joined by the captain.

'Storm or no storm,' said Sandy, 'I maun hae my dinner, for I am aye mair than ordinary gleg at meal times, what wi' the sea air and the anxiety o' mind nateral to a seafaring life.' And he pulled towards him an ample tin can filled with pea-

soup, in which floated unctuous morsels of fat pork, and availing himself of the absence of his companions, ate for the whole mess, while overhead the skies darkened down till the whole firmament to leeward was black with whirling masses of cloud, which, reflected on the sea beneath, seemed to lend to it also the ominous blackness of the gathering tempest. There was no wind, and the intense and deathlike stillness rendered the darkness more awful.

'Up with the helm and square away the yards,' shouted the captain, and the trampling of the men's feet and the sound of their voices as they worked, groping for the ropes in the murky, dim half-light, had a weird and startling effect. It even terrified Sandy, who, groaning in spirit, left the more than half-emptied can of pea-soup, and, with the best part of a cabin biscuit in his hand, made his way to his master's side.

'Hech, sirs, saw ye ever siccan an awfu' sight. It's borne in upon my mind that it's the last day this, Maister Frank.'

'It may be for us, any minute,' said Frank Blake.

'Preserve us a'—that's awfu'!' And as he spoke a broad flash of ghastly blue flame swept the ship from stem to stern, lighting up every face with its lurid glare, and gleaming out upon the water, showing for a moment the white crests of the rising waves. Another flash of still more vivid intensity, and then another and another succeeded each other with such rapidity that the whole air seemed to quiver with electricity, while overhead the thunder roared as if the angry heavens were parting asunder with each concussion, peal answering to peal and to the hoarse murmur of the sea, which began to growl like a wild beast ravening for its prey. There was still no rain, but the rising wind drove showers of foaming water over the decks, blinding the men who were still struggling to get in the sails. Then the wind suddenly shifted, and, rushing as if possessed by a demon along the dark bosom of the deep, seized the devoted ship in its Titanic grip. In a moment every shred of canvas was torn into rags, as if it had been the merest spider's web; bolts and chain-plates gave

way, and a torrent of foaming water rushed rolling in over the bows.

Rising half-smothered from out a mass of ropes, floating spars, and struggling men, Frank Blake looked confusedly around him. 'Where are you, Sandy?' he cried.

'Ou jist here, Maister Frank,' cried that worthy. 'I have been round at the cook's galley getting a bit bag o' biscuit. Will ye no hae a mouthfu' o' something to chew at—it's wonderfu' supporting, sir.'

'Thank you, no, I could not. I feel as if the smallest bit would choke me.'

'Eh, sirs, the like o' that, when a body kens that there's naething like meat for keeping up the heart! Aweel, aweel, a wilfu' man maun gang his ain gait. Saw ye ever sic lightning?—it's fearsome!'

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when a ball of fire struck the mainmast and seemed to shiver into innumerable flashing atoms. There was a dull crash, and then, loud above the roar of the thunder and the growl of the waves, one wild shrill cry of human agony rose to heaven, and all was darkness again and chaos, as, with a deafening howl, the hurricane once more rushed over them.

'That was poor Sandy's voice,' thought Frank Blake, with a thrill of indescribable emotion. The next moment he was gasping for breath, half-suffocated by the salt, hissing spray of the deathly cold water, an agonized unit in a drenched mass of struggling arms and wildly-clutching hands.

The mate was the first who clambered up out of the jumble of men, and made his way to the wheel, from which the helmsman had been swept, as it appeared, for ever, for he was never seen again. As soon as he reached the helm he put it hard up, shook himself like a huge water dog, and then remarked coolly:

'That was a tight shave—we were as nearly swamped as could be; but keep up your hearts, my lads, the old gal will weather it now, I'll go bound.'

His confident tone reassured the men, who had the most absolute faith in the sailing qualities of the *Ocean Queen*; they became cheerful and worked with a will, cutting away the mizen-mast, that the ship might be put before the wind, as she no longer answered to her helm.

It was a difficult and dangerous task, and such was the force of the tempest, that until she was cleared of the wreck of the masts the ship would not right, but seemed to be settling down more and more into the water. As soon, however, as she was cleared from the wreckage, she began to pay off, and slowly righted. Each man then breathed more freely—it was a reprieve, at least; the sea also was going down, the hurricane had settled into a gale, strong enough in all conscience, but no longer a tornado, and the dismasted ship drove before it, rolling heavily, after a manner sufficiently alarming to a landsman, but which the sailors made light of. All danger they declared was at an end, and Frank Blake, despite his sincere grief for the loss of his poor companion, was so utterly exhausted that he was glad to go below and turn in. He had scarcely lain down when he fell sound asleep and knew no more, until he was awakened by a terrific crash. Springing to his feet, he hurried on deck without losing a moment, and saw that a large vessel had struck them amidships and had passed astern out of sight. The captain and mate were at the wheel, and as he came on deck he heard the captain give an order to put the helm hard a port.

‘A light on the starboard bow,’ sung out the look-out man, and everyone looked anxiously in that direction. As for the poor *Ocean Queen*, her days were numbered—it was impossible that she could float long: there was a fearful rent in her side, and the water was rushing in through it in an impetuous flood.

The ship had already, in a few minutes, lost a great part of her buoyancy, and rolled heavily, with long reeling lurches, like a drunken man trying to recover his equilibrium.

‘We’re bound for Davy’s locker,’ muttered one of the men, ‘in double quick time, too.’

'We are doomed,' said another.

'It's all over with the old *Ocean Queen*!' groaned a third.

'Make ready, lads, to clear away the boats,' shouted the captain; but it was too late—a great sea, like a wall of green unbroken water, came rolling in over the bows, and the ill-starred ship, pitching forward as if to meet it, gave a sickening reel and lurched forward heavily into it. A cry, a wild desolate agonizing shriek, the wail of more than twenty hearts in their last agony, rang out on the startled midnight, and then all was still, save where the water yet circled in eddies over the sinking ship.

Frank could think in his extremity of no familiar words of prayer, he could utter none except the instinctive cry, 'Oh God, be merciful!'—they were on his lips when he sank into the whirling eddy which opened beneath him like a foaming whirlpool, sucking all down into the vortex of death. A fragment of wreck floated past him, and he made a clutch at it with his cold cramped hands and caught it, but it was too late to save him. With ineffable agony he drew his last gasping, choking breath, and sunk down unconscious into the black waste of waters.

CHAPTER IV.

THE 'JUNO.'

'All must die when fate shall will it,
Providence ordains it so;
Every bullet has its billet,
Man the boats, boys: yeo, heave yeo.'

Was this life or death? Were these men or spirits? Could pain follow the struggling mortal into the land of immortality? With difficulty, as if it were clogged with tenfold its old weight of clay, he raised his cramped icy cold hand to his

blue gasping agonized face, and tried to clear away the film from his eyes, that he might see clearly ; but he was too weak—his head would have fallen back if it had not been supported from behind, and then some kind hand held to his cold lips something warm and comforting, and with an effort he swallowed it, and it seemed to thaw his stagnant blood. Gradually he began to breathe more easily and with less of pain. With an effort he opened his eyes, but he could see nothing clearly, only a luminous mist, in which dim figures seemed to move up and down. ‘Where am I?’ he gasped at last in a faint almost inaudible voice.

‘You are on board her majesty’s sloop of war the *Juno*, and all you want now is rest and food ; your sufferings are comparatively speaking over, but you are very weak. Lie down now and try to sleep.’ The voice was kind but authoritative ; and he had neither the will nor the power to resist the implied order, but gladly obeyed. When he awoke he felt stronger, and in a few days was able to sit up and look about him, and arrive at the facts about his new position. It was by the *Juno* that the ill-fated *Ocean Queen* had been run down and sunk. After passing the wreck she had tacked, and remained for some hours near the spot of the disaster to render any assistance that might be possible ; but except himself, none of the crew of the doomed vessel had been saved, and to him, as if to atone for the misfortune, every one was as kind as possible. The captain, who had just been promoted to the *Juno* after serving as first-lieutenant in different ships for twenty years, was, as might have been expected, not quite a youth ; he was, in fact, an elderly weather-beaten man, with a bald head and a broad bluff honest face.

‘You are welcome on board the *Juno*,’ he said to our poor friend, ‘until we can find some means of forwarding you to your destination, and while here you will consider yourself as my guest.’

Having thus relieved his conscience, he did not take very much further notice of Frank, except by nodding to him

occasionally, for he was a man of few words, nor did Frank by any means regret his inattention. He did not want for friends, for he had a pleasant, hearty way with him ; he could sing a good song and tell a good story, and these gifts made him welcome in the gun-room.

The *Juno*, as he soon learned, had, in the opinion of her junior officers, been having a peculiarly wearisome and unprofitable time of it of late. She was, and had been for the last few months, cruising about for slavers, where, as they alleged, no slavers were to be found. There was no hope of prizes, no hope of promotion—it was, in short, the very quintessence of ennui, and ‘old Ned Trelawny,’ as they irreverently dubbed the captain, ‘ought to have known better than to have been guilty of such stark-staring madness.’

‘Shure, honey,’ said the senior midshipman, an Irish lad, ‘it’s the blessed truth I’m telling you ; your ship was the first we had seen for six months.’

‘Well, you took good care you should not see it long ; you soon did our little bit of business for us.’

‘Didn’t we though? I don’t mind telling you, between friends, that it’s about the smartest thing the old tub ever did in her life ; and she is goodness knows how old ; I feel sometimes as if I had been stagnating here aboard of her for hundreds of years. Long ago, when I was young, I used to have some doubts about the legend of the Wandering Jew—now I have none ; and what’s more, I can quite enter into the feelings of that ancient and unfortunate Israelite. What, Jones ! are you going to fish, eh?’

‘Why, yes ; we must do something to make our miserable lives as endurable as possible,’ responded Mr. Jones, a dapper little midshipman, merrily breaking out into a stave of the old song :

“ ‘To all you ladies now on land,
We men at sea indite :
But first would have you understand
How hard it is to write or think,
The Muses now and Neptune, too,
We must implore to write to you.” ’

'Don't, don't, I entreat of you, Jones, don't try it. There are no fish in these seas, and have been none to my certain knowledge for the last fifty years; but if there were shoals of them, that extraordinary bray of yours would frighten them away.'

'Bless my life, Byrne, you don't mean to say you don't like it? I can assure you I have a voice that is universally admired; ask Blake there, he knows a thing or two—he is not such an out-and-out uncivilised barbarian as you are.'

'Thank you for nothing, Jones, my darling. Well, if you will fish, you may; but remember, I warned you. It's a dead calm, of course—it's always as nearly as possible a dead calm with us at this time of day. We have got used to it, but I'm sorry for you, Mr. Blake; it's hard lines for an outsider to go rumbling and tumbling about in this blessed old tub for ever, like a modern Vanderdecken, only we are worse off than he was, for we never have even a chance of sending a message home.'

'I say,' quoth Frank, 'there's a bite; what has he got? a bird, as I live, and such a bird—a regular whopper.'

'Hillo!' exclaimed Byrne, 'what has he got?—a bird?—yes, I should say a bird—"And with my crossbow I shot the albatross"—why, that was a hundred thousand times more humane, and more sportsman-like, too, than hooking it through the tongue. Oh, Jones, Jones, the Ancient Mariner was nothing to you—but that's your own look out; I would not have your luck for the world.'

'Mind yourself, my handsome darling, and let my luck alone; I can manage it pretty well myself, if only it would stop struggling at such a rate. Ugh, you vicious brute! it's as nearly as possible made a grab at my little finger.'

'Chuck him overboard, then, as fast as you can, to feed the sharks, if sharks there are in these waters, which I don't believe.'

'We are in the latitude for them, are we not?' said Frank Blake.

'Oh, hang latitude and longitude out of school. We are

in the latitude for vegetating our lives away, that is all I know—"As idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean." Who is that grumbling there something about an incorrect quotation? that's all nonsense, you know, must be. I had the pleasure of knowing the Ancient Mariner, sir; a queer old fogey he was, something of the cut of the captain. No, you need not stare at me in that way—I was not the wedding-guest he buttonholed in such an extraordinary fashion—never was at a wedding in my life, I give you my word of honour for that; but as to the quotation, which you are pleased to style incorrect, if it is not what the Ancient Mariner said, it is what I am sure he ought to have said; and now, Jones, that you have got it, what are you going to do with that feathered animal of yours? If I might suggest——'

'Stop your chaffing, Byrne, there's Davy Clewer overboard; I thought that larking would come to no good.'

'Why, what a Solon you are. If Lieutenant Stiff, who is not particularly unbending, sees no harm in it, why need you?—it will give him a bath, that is all.'

'Aye, and he'll have a swim for it, too; but he's no tailor at that,' muttered Jones.

Here Lieutenant Stiff, *in propria persona*, a tall, thin, lanky man, looked over the side of the ship, but did not interfere. He, no doubt, thought the man, who was an excellent swimmer, was in no danger, and deserved a thorough ducking for his pains.

'Pull for the cable, Davy,' shouted one of his messmates; and then the fun went on again fast and furious, when suddenly the look-out in the bows sung out: 'There is a big fish in the water—a big shovel-nosed fish!'

Quick as thought Byrne sprang to the other side, followed by Jones and Frank Blake.

'It is a shark,' he cried; 'pull for the rope, Davy.'

'Man a boat there!' cried the lieutenant.

The man, who had been gambolling up and down in the water, now struck out steadily for the ship, while his every

movement was watched with intense excitement from the ship's side. The boat had been manned in an incredibly short time, and its crew, armed with boathooks and cutlasses, were rapidly pulling towards him, but with all the speed they made, the shark distanced them. It was a large fish, thirteen or fourteen feet long, and when first seen was lying sluggish and inert in the water, apparently basking in the heat of the sun. Its attention was, however, quickly attracted by the noise and splashing of its unconscious prey, and sinking to give greater impetus to its rush, it made a dash at the man, raising its broad head, and making a sort of leap at him, which lifted its head and shoulders three or four feet above the water. The man, now fully aroused to a sense of his danger, was making all the speed he could towards the ship, while the men in the boat were pulling desperately and rapidly gaining on the monster; but he, on his part, had won the fearful race, and was already opening his enormous jaws to make a grab at his prey.

'Jink it, Davy, jink it!' called out one or two of his mess-mates.

'Give a dash to one side, my man,' shouted Byrne. 'The brute can't bite as long as it is swimming forwards.' But the poor fellow's self-possession and presence of mind forsook him. Instead of dexterously evading the huge jaws that were gaping for him, he made a dash at a rope that had been let down for him, and missed it. The next moment he uttered a shrill scream of agony, and a gush of blood purpled the water, which was lashed into foam by the struggles of the fish to drag him down and the efforts of his comrades in the boat to retain him. They had got hold of him by the arms, and were digging their cutlasses and boathooks into the voracious monster, but were unable for a time to force him to relinquish his prey. He mumbled and crunched the bones and flesh with his huge jaws, and writhed and tossed in the water at every prod of the cutlasses, and lashed it into foam with his tail, but he would not let go his hold.

'For the love of heaven,' moaned the wounded man, faintly, 'save me, messmates! save me! He is eating me by inches.'

The men upon this redoubled their efforts, and succeeded in forcing the tiger of the water to let go his hold; but as he did so he closed his jaws with a snap, and, with a crunching rasp that made every one shudder, bit off both feet just above the ankle. Poor Davy, set free at last in this fearful manner, was brought back to the ship as carefully as possible by his comrades. He was faint and very pale, but wonderfully self-possessed and brave.

'I don't feel much pain to speak of now, sir,' he said to the surgeon; 'and with your help, I don't doubt but that I shall do well.'

'I sincerely hope so, my poor fellow,' said the surgeon, cheerily. 'There's nothing like keeping up a good heart.' But when his work was done, and poor Davy made as comfortable as his unhappy circumstances permitted, he spoke of the case doubtfully. 'He may do,' he said. 'He has a good constitution, and that is so far in his favour; but I should not wonder if he slipped through my fingers, after all.'

For a day or two, however, there was nothing to justify this doubtful augury. Davy seemed doing well, the wounds, frightful as they were, were healing kindly. There was no fever, and, as he liked to be read to, Byrne and Frank Blake took turns of that duty, the latter often reading to him a chapter out of the Bible which his mother had given him, and which the poor sailor said seemed to bring back his own young days.

'I can't bear that cool shaver of a Sawbones,' said Byrne one morning. 'I believe he has been in mortal terror that poor Clewer would forereach on Davy. Guess what he has just said to me.'

'That he is not so well, perhaps, to day.'

'Not a bit of it, honey. No, hang it, I wouldn't have minded that. "But you'll be sorry to hear, Byrne dear," says

he, in his drawling way, "that poor Clewer is booked, going fast. I really do, you know, regret it. I had a great interest in him," which, you are aware, is all gammon, for everybody knows he has no more heart than the shark had.'

'Have you seen Clewer, Byrne?'

'I have just been to look at him, and he seems all right, only there's a queer twitching about his muscles, which makes him if anything more uncomfortable than usual; and the boatswain's mate, who is as good at managing him as a hospital nurse, says that he has been light in the head this morning, but I don't know that that signifies much.'

'Poor fellow! I'll go down, I think, and see how he is.'

'You can't, that's the worst of it. Sawbones has given orders that no one is to see him but the boatswain's mate and the master gunner, who has been in the habit of relieving him. Eh, who would have thought that old swab would have cut up so well at that sort of work. He looks as gruff an old sea-dog as ever growled through a thirty-two-pound carronade.'

'There is no knowing what is in a man until he is tried, Byrne.'

Late in the afternoon of the same day, Frank Blake was walking alone on the deck, when the surgeon came up to him.

'Poor Clewer has asked for you, and I said I would let you know. Your seeing him now can do no harm, Mr. Blake.'

'You think his case hopeless, then?'

'Perfectly hopeless. He is dying of lockjaw. I always did have my doubts of the case, from the first.'

On the deck it was breezy and pleasant, and from the contrast the heat when they went below seemed stifling. The dying man lay in his narrow hammock, with the light from a smoky lamp falling upon his pale, ashy face, which had a fixed, staring, painful expression, while from time to time it twitched convulsively. Two of the men held his arms, which were violently jerked about, and old Squab was slowly ruh-

bing his poor mutilated legs ; but, through all his sufferings, he was still brave and composed.

‘It won’t last long now, doctor, will it?’ he asked, partially opening his eyes at the sound of footsteps, and catching sight of the doctor’s familiar form.

‘I hope not,’ said the doctor, gently. ‘And now I have brought you Mr. Blake, Davy.’

Again he opened his eyes.

‘It is good of you to come to see a poor fellow like me, Mr. Blake. Perhaps you will read me a bit—it helps me—and say a scrap of a prayer, for I shall soon be where nothing else will help me.’

Frank looked round him for a moment half irresolute. He then took out his Bible and read a few sentences, and then, not without what he felt all the time to be a very paltry fear of his audience, he did manage to remember and repeat, in a low, solemn tone, a short prayer, to which the dying man listened intently, struggling, in his eagerness to hear, to suppress the terrible spasm that seemed about to seize him in a final death clutch. He could no longer speak, for his teeth were tightly clenched, and the muscles of his neck were stiff and rigid, but he tried to stretch out his poor, jerking hand. Frank Blake took it with a heavy heart, and even as he did so it stiffened into marble-like rigidity, his features sharpened, his chest heaved and then as suddenly collapsed—he was gone !

‘He is dead, as dead as a door-nail,’ drawled the surgeon. He meant no harm—it was only his way ; but something in his tone, which seemed like levity, jarred on the young man’s excited feelings, and without a word he turned and went up on deck.

The moon had risen, and was shedding her silver radiance over the wide wastes of water, which, gently heaving, reflected her rays in thousands of gleaming sparkles from a multitude of small waves. No sound broke the silence, no sign of life disturbed the intense solitariness of the moment ;

the decks were deserted, the watch were stowed away out of sight; only Byrne, motionless as a statue, leaned with folded arms against the weather gangway looking intently out to sea.

'Why, friend Byrne,' said Blake at last, going up to him. 'What has come over you? What do you see out there?'

'Look,' he said, pointing to a mass of straggling pale-blueish limelight-like flame, which hovered irregularly over the wake of the ship, distinct by reason of its sickly glare from the flood of moonlight. 'Look, do you see that?'

'To be sure I do,' said Frank. 'It is very curious. What a pale, ghastly, phosphorescent gleam it has.'

'Do you think I don't know all that?' said Byrne, with an abrupt hard laugh. 'A phosphorescent meteor; that is the proper term for it, is it not? Nowadays everything must be dissected, examined, turned outside-in, and, above all, explained away. Ah well! I have seen it more than once when I was a boy in the old churchyard of Derrydale, and I know what it always meant then. Look how the men are cowering and shrinking under the lee of the boats; the very look-out up there is shivering where he stands. Take my word for it, there will be laced hammocks for more of us than poor Davy Clewer before many hours are over.'

Despite his natural good sense, Frank for a moment felt himself shrink as the spectral flame, slowly rising, flickered over them, and then faded away into nothingness.

'Ugh! how cold it is,' said Byrne; 'and something of a faint churchyard odour—did you not feel it?'

'What nonsense! You are joking, Byrne.'

'Of course I am,' rejoined Byrne, sharply; 'I never can be serious for more than two minutes at a time. Listen, the look-out forward there is going to crack a joke too; I saw his mouth open, but as I live, the poor fellow is past speaking. No, here it comes.'

'A sail!' sung out the man. 'A sail on the lee-bow.'

In a moment the silent ship was as full of buzz and bustle as an overcrowded hive.

'How shall we steer?' bawled the first lieutenant from the quarter-deck, where he was standing beside the captain.

'A couple of points to the southward, sir—steady!'

Mechanically the man at the helm took up the strain, and sung out, 'Steady! steady!' with a shrill prolonged intonation, that mingled wildly with the rush of the rising wind as it whistled through the cordage. The night, formerly so clear and calm, began to get overcast, and the strange sail, plainly seen for a moment, dropped abeam of the *Juno* and disappeared.

The look-out drew the sleeve of his jacket across his eyes.

'Where is she now?' asked the captain, impatiently.

'Shure, I cannot tell, sir, for the life of me. She was there only a minute since.'

'She'll be fore-and-aft rigged, and she'll have tacked, sir,' suggested the lieutenant. 'Do you see nothing now, Davis?'

'Yes, shure, sir, there she is again, lengthening out in the scud abaft our beam. Mick, put the helm down, she's tack-
ing to the windward.'

At this moment the clouds cleared off the moon, which shone brightly out, and showed a large schooner, very low and sharp in the bows—evidently a swift sailer, and with every inch of her canvas spread. Finding that the *Juno* was bearing down upon her, she tacked again, and crowding all her sail, bore up before the wind.

'Luck at last,' chuckled the captain, rubbing his hands together, a habit he had when he was excited. 'Clear away the bow guns and pipe all hands to quarter.'

'Aye, aye, sir,' was the hearty rejoinder; and amid the shouting and scuffling of the men, the grinding of the slides, and the rattling of the heavy carriages, the long guns were run out and shotted.

'Now, then, give it to him.'

Boom went the gun, the shot crashing along the strange

sail's counter, and splintering the timber as it ploughed along her side.

'She has not shortened sail,' said the second lieutenant; 'she is crushing on faster than before.'

Every eye was now directed to the chase, which, with her white sails swelling to the breeze, seemed in the moonlight like some lovely white and black sea-bird, skimming away on wings of light between the sea and sky.

'Fire again.'

'Aye, aye, sir,' and again boom went the gun—this time with better effect; the shot struck her foremast and cut it in two, and in a moment, her foretop-sail royal and scudding-sail haulyards were let go, and her foretop-sail lay over her side.

'Now hail her.'

'Schooner, ahoy! What schooner is that?'

No answer.

'Heave to, or we'll sink you.'

Still no answer; but her crew could be seen swarming like black pigmies on her yards and rigging.

'She is full of men,' said Mr. Stiff, the first lieutenant, craning his long neck into the air, as if he meant to count them.

'She is a slaver,' said the captain, 'and she'll show her teeth presently, or I am mistaken. Has she tacked, Mr. Stiff?'

'She is bearing up resolutely, sir; she has hauled her courses, and thrown out her flag, and is coming down upon us in regular man-of-war fashion.'

'There is her first card,' said Byrne, as a round shot fell hissing into the water. 'It's wide of the mark, but she will improve when she comes to close quarters; we'll have a tussle for it.'

'Beat to quarters, all hands to shorten sail. How many guns can you make out, Mr. Stiff?'

'Seven ports and six guns on a side, sir; and she's running down as if to pass under our stern.'

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‘Luff up sharp then, and fire a broadside.’

The two vessels were now so near, that those on the *Juno’s* decks could hear the crash of the shot as it fell on board the schooner, and see the splinters of timber which flew from the sides ; while a succession of mingled oaths, groans and yells testified that it was not the dumb material ship alone that had suffered.

It was now the *Juno’s* turn, and the slaver lost no time in replying, blazing away in succession with all her guns, with such hearty good-will, and with an aim so steady and precise, that it showed the game was by no means new to her.

‘Fire away !’ cried the captain of the *Juno*. ‘Give her the other broadside. Quick, or she will fetch away, and draw out from under our fire.’

‘She has it hard this time, plump into her bows,’ quoth Mr. Stiff ; ‘but as I live there she goes,’ and even as he spoke she shot ahead out of the range of the guns ; and then, as if changing her mind, she hauled by the wind, shortened sail, and came down upon the *Juno* again, evidently, from the preparations visible, with the intention of boarding her.

The chase and fight had now continued the greater part of the night, and it was or should have been morning light ; but instead of that it seemed always getting darker ; and the smoky light of the torches as they were held aloft flung a partial and lurid glare over the hurrying figures below, which made them seem less like men than demons.

Bold as the slaver’s desperate crew were, the men of the *Juno* were not less determined. Armed with their cutlasses, and with Lieutenant Stiff at their head, they stood ready to spring upon her deck as soon as ever the grappling irons were made fast, while her old captain, rubbing his hands together as if he meant to take the skin off them, shouted out his orders :

‘Put the helm up and lay her alongside. There, that will do—out with the grapplings. There, have you got them fast?’

Stiff sprang forward with a loud hurrah ; the red smoky

light of a torch fell full upon his uncouth figure and coarse features, to which the rapt energy and excitement of the moment gave almost a sublime expression. His head was bare, and his long unkempt hair streamed out behind him as he cried: 'Follow me, my lads! Boarders, our work lies there.'

An exultant cheer half burst from the throats of the men who were pressing after him, and was then strangled on their lips, gurgling forth in an inarticulate murmur of astonishment and awe. A sudden dazzling flash of lightning broke from the lowering heavens, and striking the mast of the slaver, shivered it into splinters; while Stiff, who was in the very act of leaping over her counter, recoiled with an appalled ear-splitting yell, and tugged furiously, like a Titan gone mad, at the grappling irons. 'She is on fire—she is on fire!—hatchets, men; tear, cut ourselves loose!' Instinctively the men behind him divined the danger, and aiding his efforts, the *Juno* was got loose. 'Up with your helm, and get her away. Steady men, no rushing forward—there.' The rest of the sentence was unfinished, for with a roar, which for a moment deafened the crash of the loud thunder, the slaver flew into the air like a gigantic rocket. Her magazine had exploded, and her shotted guns, as she blew up, fired aimlessly right and left, doing unfortunately no little mischief on board the *Juno*, owing to the close proximity of the two vessels. Pieces of the burning wreck were shot out in all directions, and fell hissing like meteors into the water, while the lightning flashed almost without intermission from sea to sky, and the thunder, drowned for a moment by a still more awful crash, rolled out again its mighty knell upon the troubled night; while down beneath, amid the drift and spray of the rising sea, portions of the hull which still held together glowed like red hot volcanoes, burning so fiercely that the roaring and crackling of the flames could be distinctly heard, mingled, alas! with wild shrieks and yells of human agony, as the few survivors of her crew and cargo rose amid fragments of the

smoking wreck, only to struggle unavailingly for a few seconds, and then to disappear, with the cry of despair choking and gurgling on their lips, into the whirlpool-like vortex, caused by the sinking ship.

The *Juno* could render her no assistance—she had enough to do with herself. It was now seven in the morning; but in place of getting lighter, a darkness more ominous than before was settling down over the wild scene; the thunder had ceased, although an occasional arrowy fork of lightning still lit up the gloom. There was no wind immediately around the ship, but high above in mid air could be heard the roar of the approaching squall, while from the sea came a sullen hoarse murmur, so loud and indefinable, that it struck awe into every heart.

‘All hands to shorten sail!’ cried the second lieutenant, for poor Stiff was for the time *hors de combat*; and for some minutes the men worked to get everything snug, leaving the wounded untended until everything had been got ready for the expected tornado. When all was done that could be done, Frank Blake, looking out in the direction of the expected storm, thought he saw something struggling in the water.

‘There is something down there,’ he cried, ‘a man or a boy; keep the ship away a bit, Mr. Gruff, and I will try to save the poor wretch.’

‘Bless me,’ said Mr. Gruff, who was a round, jolly-looking, red-faced little man, ‘you don’t mean to say that you are going to risk your life, after what we have come through, too, for the sake of a worthless black fellow like that?’

‘I do, though,’ he said, fastening a rope round his waist; ‘and now, my lads, you’ll haul me in if I miss, won’t you?’

‘Aye, aye, sir,’ cried the men, clustering forward, ‘that we will;’ and the next moment he was overboard, lost to sight amid the surf and spray.

‘He has it.’

‘No, he has missed it.’

‘What is it, a man or a boy?’

‘More likely a floating spar, or an empty hen-coop,’ grumbled Mr. Gruff; ‘but, fool as he is, I won’t have him drowned. Down with the helm, and bring the ship to the wind; he has got it, whatever it is. There, haul him in there, softly. So you’re safe again on board, my fine fellow. What have you got there?’

‘A little negro lad,’ said Frank Blake, shaking himself like a huge water dog; ‘but the poor creature is almost gone.’

‘There,’ said Gruff, ‘some of you forward there, wrap him in warm clothes, and I’ll get you some wine and water for him; as for you, Mr. Blake, make yourself snug, and then go below—old Sawbones is shouting for you like the very mischief.’

As quickly as he could, Frank changed his wet clothes, and then made the best of his way to the captain’s cabin, where the surgeon was busy. He looked up as he entered.

‘Ah, Mr. Blake, glad to see you—over head and ears in work—in want of a dresser a leetle more active than old Squab here, although he has done very well. I make no apologies for troubling you—no time for that; take your place. Who have we next? Ah, Mr. Byrne,’ as two men advanced and laid down their bloody load before him.

‘I always said you would never cooper me, doctor, and no more you can—I am beyond your power,’ said a faint voice.

‘Hand me that tourniquet, Blake,’ said the doctor, and Frank, as he did so, felt himself turn dizzy and faint. Was that his friend, writhing there in his misery like a crushed worm? His once healthy colour was gone, and his face was of a ghastly blueish white.

‘Water,’ he gasped, ‘give me water, for the love of heaven!’

Frank held it to his lips, but he could not drink it.

‘It is deathly cold,’ he muttered, and with that a great gush of blood burst from his lips, showing that he had other injuries besides the shattered limb with which the doctor was busy.

'He is gone, I am afraid,' said Frank.

'Bless you, yes,' said the doctor, a little impatiently. 'There can't be two opinions about that, so our long war of words is over—poor Byrne!' And feeling that he had handsomely paid off with this requiem all scores between himself and the dead youth, Mr. Sawbones looked round. 'Ah, Stiff, you there, come along.'

'I will rather wait a little,' said Mr. Stiff, looking round. 'There are some of the poor fellows badly hurt—see to them first—it may be a matter of life or death to some of them; I can wait.'

'As you like,' rejoined the phlegmatic surgeon; 'I don't suppose it will make much difference in the end, for by the row overhead, I take it that we are all going to Davy together, and in double quick time too, I think.'

CHAPTER V.

THE TORNADO.

'Loud roared the dreadful thunder,
The rain a deluge showers,
The clouds were rent asunder,
By lightning's vivid powers.'

It was not without reason that Mr. Sawbones made, or rather drawled out, in his usual cool fashion, the above remark; the noise overhead was astounding, absolutely deafening, and made up of many elements. There was for the bass of the discordant diapason, the deep growl of the approaching tempest, the trampling of the men's feet, the hoarse shouting of orders, the shrill, melancholy cadence of the steersman's voice, and the creaking, groaning, and thumping of the stout

old ship as she lurched and rolled as uneasily as ever did martyr of old on the rack. Rain was falling heavily—no balmy summer shower, but rather a perpendicular stream of water like a waterspout—and the black waves, as they rolled in like a succession of mountains, were crested with foam. Still there was no wind, only an appalling darkness, so dense that the men could scarcely see each other even by the light of the lanterns.

‘Heave to, and keep her head to the southward, sharp!’ sang out Mr. Gruff; but before so much as a rope could be let go, the tornado was upon them, and the *Juno*, caught by the squall, veered round upon her beam ends so sharply, that it seemed for one awful moment as if she would turn over keel uppermost. In a moment, however, she righted, and when laid to with her head to the southward, breasted the gale, if not like a stormy petrel, at least very respectably for such an old tub, to use the disrespectful nomenclature of her junior officers.

The gale now came thundering down in earnest, and the ship scudded along over the tremendous seas, sometimes rising on the top of a huge wave, quivering, poised like a seagull on its gigantic summit, and the next sinking down into the trough of the sea, with a colossal wall of hissing water hanging above ready to rush down and swamp it. As it was, she had one or two good baths.

‘Mind the wheel,’ would be suddenly heard hoarsely clear above the roaring and growling of the elements.

Then would come a sharp ‘All hands look out,’ from Mr. Gruff; and obeying his orders in more senses than one, all hands would look out, to see what looked not like a wave, but rather like a huge green mountain of water flecked with curling wreaths of foam, as if some sea monster, opening his gigantic jaws, were showing his cruel white fangs preparatory to seizing and crunching up his doomed prey. Then, rushing forward with a hoarse growling roar, it would roll in over the

decks, fore and aft, and sweep their lumber, animate and inanimate, into one gasping creaking jumble of confusion.

Many a one in their heart thought that it was all over with the *Juno*, and that she would never rise again, but although many a smarter vessel would have been swamped, the maligned old tub emerged gallantly from under water—if she was slow, she was strong—and tore through the boiling seas, with the great waves twisting and writhing like so many foiled pythons beneath her tough bows.

The weather now began to moderate, the wind first sensibly abated and then fell almost to a dead calm, and the sun shone brightly out, sparkling cheerily over the dark blue fathomless waves that had so lately been the scene of so fearful a tragedy. From them all trace of it had gone for ever, but the *Juno's* decks were still bloody, her sails and rigging were torn, and her hull was splintered in many places by the round shot. It was a scene well fitted to solemnise the most thoughtless, and Frank Blake, who was rather of a serious turn of mind, was leaning over the gangway, sunk in profound and melancholy thought, when he suddenly felt his foot lifted and placed upon something soft, and looking down saw, to his amazement and momentary horror, that it was upon the head of the black boy, whom he had risked his life to save during the previous night, but whom he had forgotten all about during the excitement of the morning.

‘I your boy now, Massa Blake,’ said the poor creature. ‘Ole massa dead; me saw him myshelf knock down wid one gun.’

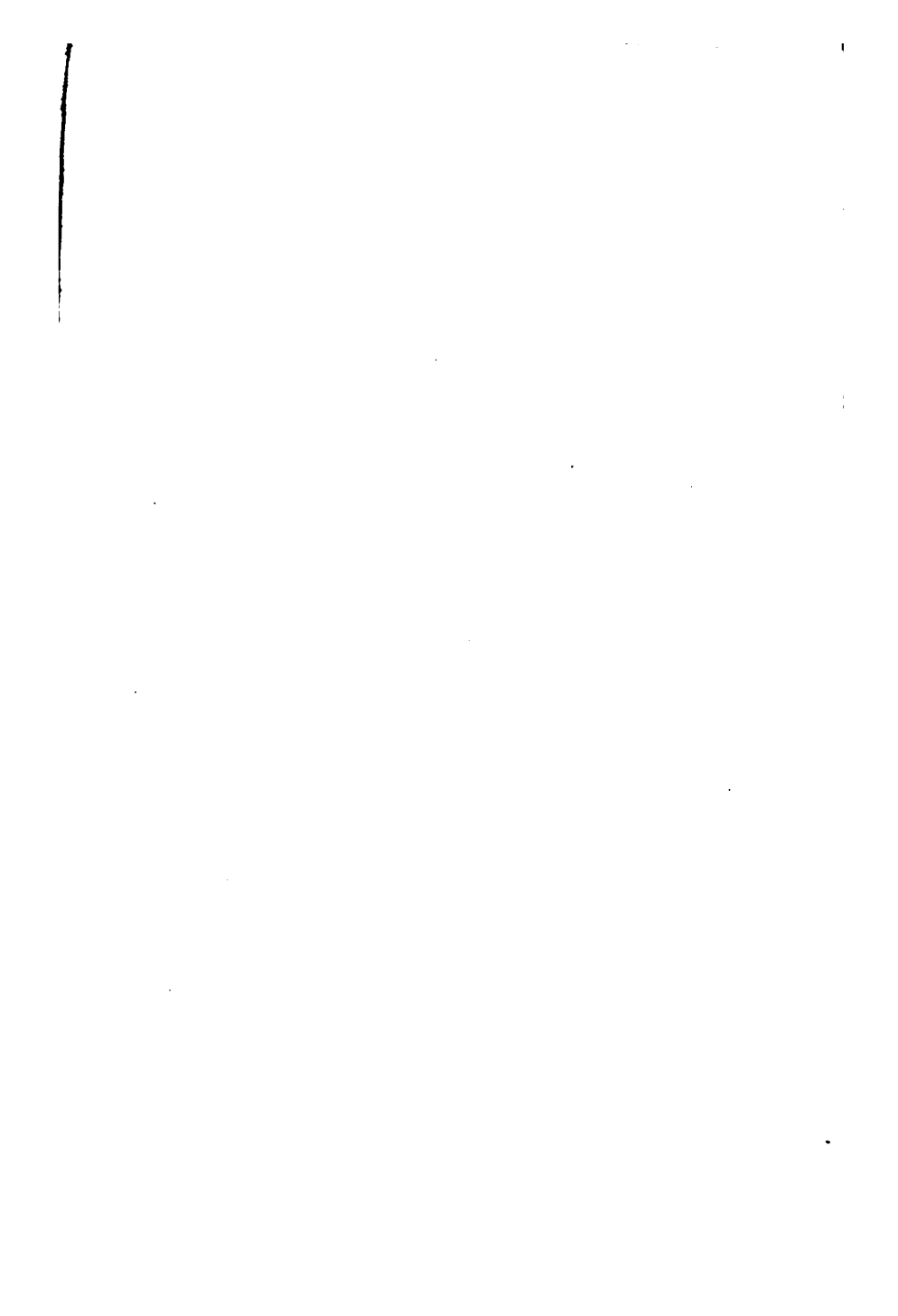
‘You cannot be my boy in the sense of belonging to me,’ said Frank. ‘You are free now. You know that, of course, and need have no master unless you choose.’

The negro boy stopped short, and faced round with an expression of forlorn surprise and bewilderment on his black visage, and then came out with the piteous appeal: ‘Ah, massa, you no leave me!—Pompey must have massa; massa



'I your boy now, Massa Blake.'

[Page 44.]



take Pompey—him find he hab one gooder sarvant than he ever hab before.'

'I will take you, then, and pay you such wages as may be considered fair and suitable.'

'Wages! What dat, massa?'

'I shall pay you for your work, Pompey. Is that your name?'

'Yes, dat my name; I myshelf Pompey Jocaloo, and I massa's boy now.'

'Yes; had you any friends on board the slaver, Pompey?'

'What I? Massa is joking; dem all black niggers, and I myshelf one Christian man like massa.'

'I see; and now have you got anything to eat?'

'No, all de crew tired too much; but now dey light de fire, cook wittal, Pompey get his breakfast.'

'Egad! it's more than I have got,' said Dr. Sawbones in his drawling, deliberate way; 'got through at last, as you know, Blake, and just come on deck to get a mouthful of fresh air in lieu of anything else more substantial. Bless my life, a very pretty scrimmage it must have been; and where is the slaver? and where are the unfortunate Africans?—have they got them stowed away in the hold? I wonder how they can reconcile that with their conscience?'

'There was not much of the commodity to stow away, as it chanced, doctor,' said Blake. 'The slaver blew up during the engagement; she was, or seemed to be, struck by a flash of lightning, and this'—turning to Pompey—'is the sole survivor of her crew and freight.'

'That little fellow there—and that is a Virginian negro—not a fresh import; I know enough of them to know that. Bless my life! you don't mean to tell me that five are gone, and poor Byrne, and half-a-dozen more just as likely to go as not, and me almost killed with over-work, and all for the sake of that little whipper snapper!'

'Me Pompey Jocaloo myshelf, massa,' said the negro boy, in an explanatory tone; 'me Massa Blake's own man now.'

'Ah, beg your pardon, Master Pompey Jackaloo,' said the doctor, making a low bow. 'Haven't had time to get used to the new order of things yet; but as everything seems as nearly as possible turned topsy-turvey here, where there used to be a comfortable method, perhaps you will go and see if you can get your new master and me some breakfast.'

'Sartainly, massa,' responded Pompey, with a broad grin of satisfaction. 'Me get breakfast for you and my good massa here.' And he trotted off, and soon managed to procure a frugal but satisfying meal of beef and biscuit and cold grog, to which the famished medico and his equally hungry companion sat down with a keen appetite.

'I don't think,' said Frank Blake at last, 'that I ever made so hearty a meal.'

'Or I either,' said the doctor. 'And now I feel as comfortable as I can reasonably expect to be in this weary world, at least at this juncture. And now I will turn in, I think, for a couple of hours' rest; and I advise you to do the same.'

Frank took his advice, but was for a time far too much excited to sleep, even if the incessant noise and bustle would have permitted him to do so. The wearied crew were hard at work on deck repairing, as far as possible, the injuries the ship had received, splicing and knotting the rigging and repairing the damage the foremast had met with.

Just as he was beginning to get drowsy, he was aroused by the shrill cry of the look-out at the mast-head: 'A sail on the weather bow, ho!'

'Can you make her out?'

'Not clearly, sir; but she is a large ship, close-hauled to the wind, and she is bearing down upon us.'

'Now, mark my words,' said the doctor, looking all round, and, finding that no one attended to him, button-holing Frank Blake. 'Now, mark my words, Blake, if this is another slaver we are done for. That other black chap was far too big for us, and if he had not providentially blown up, there would have been nothing left, for us who are not professional

fighters at least, but walking the plank with a couple of ten-pound shot, one at each foot, to keep us steady.'

'Ah, dat cruel sight,' put in Pompey, to whom it seemed not unfamiliar; but there was no time for listening to his reminiscences—everybody was too anxious about the strange craft, which was now seen and now lost, as the white wreaths of mist which were creeping up rose and fell on the fitful gusts of wind.

For a whole hour they watched her steadily bearing up for them, but still seen only at intervals, and so indistinctly that there was abundant room for speculation.

'Heydey, Gruff,' said the irrepressible doctor, 'this one is not afraid of us either. She is shortening sail preparatory to clearing for action, no doubt.'

At this moment the light wind blew aside the fleecy shreds of mist, and showed the strange sail right under the *Juno's* stern.

'She is neither privateer nor slaver,' said Mr. Gruff. 'Hail her.'

'Schooner ahoy! What is that schooner's name?'

'The *Mary Jane*, of Halifax, from Kingston to New York,' was the ready response.

'Heave to, then, and we will send a boat aboard of you.'

'Now, then,' said the captain, 'I must perform my promise to you, Mr. Blake, which was to put you aboard the first vessel we met bound for your destination. I am sure I speak for all when I say that we shall be very sorry to lose you.'

'I am, for one,' said Gruff; 'only I cannot make a fuss about it.'

'My dear sir,' said the doctor, 'are you fishing for a compliment? Don't we all know that eloquence is your *forte*.'

'Bah! Hold your tongue, will you now? Good-bye, God bless you, Mr. Blake.'

'My dear,' quoth the medico, 'nobody will miss you as I shall. It was such a relief to have a fellow with a few grains

of common sense in his noddle to talk to. But the best of friends must part, so I suppose I had best follow Mr. Gruff's example, and say good-bye. Pompey—where, ah where is that sable hero ?

'Here, massa,' said the modern representative of the ancient Roman general. 'Here, massa—here me myself, wid Massa Blake's bag.'

'Well, shove off with you, bag and baggage.'

Then Frank Blake, having made his adieus and expressed his thanks, which were, however, cut abruptly short, tumbled into the boat, and was pulled on board the *Mary Jane*.

The ship was a good one; the weather, which had been bad, became at last propitious, and five days later they passed Long Island and entered the harbour of New York.

CHAPTER VI.

THE NEW WORLD.

'To thine own self be true ;
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.'

Henry IV.

It was early in the morning when Frank Blake and his new factotum, Pompey, at last set foot on the shores of that great America which had so long tinged with all the hues of youth's vivid hopefulness the master's day dreams. The quay, enveloped in a yellow shroud of close-creeping fog, presented even thus early a busy scene. Around them was a forest of masts belonging to crafts of all species and sizes. There were sailing vessels of all nationalities, steam packets carrying mails and passengers, clippers of all sizes, and, piled around

and alongside of them, as they struggled through the crowd, the fruits and accumulations of a commerce which extended to the whole world. New York, one of the great commercial emporiums of the earth, seemed to Frank Blake not unworthy of its lofty destiny. He admired its regular and well-built streets, and particularly its spacious Broadway, lined with splendid shops, whose glittering and attractive windows were in process of being unveiled to the world when he saw them first.

As for Pompey, his thoughts were on other things intent.

'We tired too much, massa, to walk troo de cool streets. We find hotel and hab breakfast.'

'To be sure,' said his master. 'And here is one that will suit us very well.' And they turned into a large establishment, the lower story of which was a spacious bar, with refreshment rooms opening off. In one of these Frank Blake was soon comfortably installed, with a good breakfast before him, while Pompey took up his station behind his chair, ready to anticipate his slightest want.

After breakfast they went at once to the railway station. The railway did not yet extend beyond Indianapolis; after that they would have to make their journey by coach. But, so far as it went, Frank Blake resolved to take advantage of it. The carriages, he found, were different from what he had been accustomed to. They were not divided into compartments, but were long, narrow rooms on wheels, with a row of seats extending down each side. The passengers could move about at will from one place to another, and there was no invidious distinction of classes, although there was of colour, Pompey, he found, being relegated with others of his compatriots to a car by themselves.

At night a negro appeared in the cars, and, with a smiling 'Wid your leave, ladies and gentlemen,' effected a rapid and complete transformation in their surroundings. He drew out, much as one would draw out a telescope, a portion of the cars which had seemed to Frank Blake good, compact, solid wood, and extracting from a large bunker thus made visible a

goodly array of blankets, pillows, sheets, and mattresses, he proceeded, with a deft dexterity which the most accomplished chambermaid might have envied, to make up a series of clean, comfortable-looking beds. He then withdrew, leaving behind him a long, dimly-lighted lobby, hung with curtains on both sides.

‘Now then, stranger,’ said a tall, thin Yankee, addressing Frank. ‘Guess we had better turn in.’

Frank assented, but without expecting much comfort. The noise and oscillation seemed to him to promise anything rather than rest, but to his surprise he found on awaking in the morning that he had never had a more comfortable night’s sleep in his life. ‘When you are at Rome do as the Romans do,’ was, he concluded, an uncommonly wise axiom; so, looking around him and keeping his eyes open, as his friend of the night before had recommended him to do, he made an early rush to the lavatory, and thereby secured plenty of water, a morsel of soap, and a dry, clean towel.

Thus, eating, sleeping, and living in the train, they arrived in due course at their destination, and were conducted by their Yankee friend to a rough but tolerably comfortable hotel. Its proprietor was, somewhat to Frank’s surprise, a major, and from the verandah of his dining-room there was a splendid view of wood, mountain, and river, all gleaming, when he saw them first, in the rich hues of a western sunset. Frank was still gazing at it, spellbound by its exceeding beauty, when his more practical factotum bustled up with, ‘What massa do now? De coach hab gone.’

‘Who told you this, Pompey?’

‘One coloured gentlemans dat I meet in de street, massa. “Where de coach?” said I. “De coach! Dat be gone,” said he, as shivel as could be. “Tank you,” said I. “Me werry sorry for myself and me werry sorry for massa.”’

‘Guess you have missed the coach, stranger?’ said a small man with a thin, hatchet-shaped, weather-beaten face, and large freckled hard-knuckled hands.

'I am afraid I have,' rejoined Frank.

'Ah, guessed as much—too slick for you Britishers. Kalkilate you want to go ahead, eh, but don't know how?'

With some surprise, Frank admitted that he was right in his kalkilations.

'Wall, I reckon, I don't mind taking you myself; my name is Slouch—Colonel Ulysses Slouch.'

With growing astonishment, Frank stared at the gallant colonel. He had seen officers of that rank belonging to more than one nationality, but none in the least resembling this doughty American warrior. Then how could he accept such an obligation from a perfect stranger, or how offer remuneration, however handsome, to a colonel? He was still busy mentally discussing the *pros* and *cons* of this question, when the colonel himself came to his aid, and kindly extricated him from the worst half of his dilemma.

'What the goose are you a starin' at, stranger?' said he. 'You want to get to St. Louis, and I'll take you thar, I kalkilate, in my stage-waggon. You and the darkie thar, for a consideration.'

All was plain sailing now; there was only the bargain to strike as to the amount of the consideration. This took some time, for the colonel prided himself upon being a 'cute hand. And Frank, if he had something of the inexperience of a novice, was no fool, and not so easily parted from his money as the gallant officer had perhaps supposed; for when the momentous question was at last settled, Frank overheard him confabulating with his friend the major below.

'Yes, I guess I'll take the Britisher, but he's a darned skunk at a bargain, major. I kalkilate he's a Scotchman.'

'I guess he is,' rejoined the major, discharging, with the precision of a Swiss marksman, a long squirt of tobacco juice. 'Plaguy critters they are. They whittle away at the thin end of nothing, till you can't swap a cent of profit off them.'

Next morning Frank was up betimes, and was looking around him, when he was accosted by the colonel.

'Knocking around, stranger, eh? that's right. There's my waggon—that's a waggon for you; it licks creation hollow. No fear of it busting up like that darned train.'

'Not the least, I should say,' said Frank, drily, not greatly charmed, to tell the truth, with the outward appearance of the waggon, but he had made his bargain and resolved to stick to it.

After a good breakfast of coffee and eggs and roasted potatoes, they set off; the colonel calling attention to his horses, which were the most miserable sandcracked, spavined wretched animals that could well be seen. They started, however, at a tolerable pace along a rough corduroy road, through a level fertile plain, well watered by a river, whose windings were marked by a dark fringe of wood. As far as eye could reach, a wide ocean of grass stretched around, broken only by these scattered clumps of forest—wood and grass and water all gleaming and sparkling in the morning sun, which, shining brightly out, flushed the whole horizon with a blaze of glory. Here Frank's attention was recalled from the glories of the terrestrial paradise around him to the demeanour of Pompey, who was seated in the back part of the waggon. He looked absolutely blue with terror, and gazed upon the colonel with mouth agape and eyes distended to such a degree that they seemed ready to start out of his head; while every now and then he sang out in a stifled tone, as if to relieve his suppressed emotions, 'Oh! oh! oh! Dearie me!'

Somewhat apprehensive of the effect Pompey's demonstrations might have upon Colonel Ulysses Slouch, Frank glanced at him, but except when he launched an oath at one or other of the horses or at the road, his face was as imperturbable as a mask.

'Oh! oh! oh!' groaned Pompey in a louder tone. 'Dearie me, the worstest is to come!' and he began to sob and cry like a child.

'Keep quiet,' said his master. 'Are you ill?'

'No-o-o-o, massa. Oh! oh! oh!' recommenced Pompey. 'Dearie me!'

'I hope my servant is not disturbing you,' said Frank, politely.

The colonel turned, and looking round at Pompey, appeared to be cognisant of his presence for the first time.

'What, that poor crittur of a nigger disturb me? I guess not—I mind him no more than I do a dawg; and now, stranger, I kalkilate I have fixed you.'

'Fixed me,' said Frank, a little taken aback; 'how?'

'I guess you air a Britisher, come to knock round a little and see what you can see.'

'Why, yes,' said Frank, admitting the correctness of his fixing so far, 'I am a Britisher.'

'And rich, I guess—all you darned Britishers air.'

'If we are, I must be an exception,' rejoined Frank, 'for the truth is, I am about as poor as I can well be.'

The colonel made no reply in words, but he gave a low whistle expressive of mingled surprise and incredulity, and seizing his whip, fell to trouncing the two unfortunate horses so unmercifully, that Frank was forced to interfere on behalf of the wretched brutes, who seemed to him to be getting over the ground wonderfully.

'That's all you know, stranger,' rejoined the colonel, grimly; 'you're green yet, I kalkilate. Away thar in your nutshell of a country there's no room for a hoss to kick out; but here we must have 'em slick all round, and so if he's a good un to run we lick him, and if he's a bad un we lick him, and if he rears we lick him, and if he bolts we lick him, and if he lies down we lick him, and if he stands still we lick him—it's allus lick, lick, lick, from mornin' to night, and they likes it, them brutes does.'

'What an equine paradise it must be,' said Frank.

'You have fixed it, stranger; couldn't hitch them up nohow without it.'

The road now led further and further into the primitive wilderness. Here and there a wooden house peeped out from a clump of trees, the relics of a forest which had been partially cleared from a few acres, while the stumps of some half burned veterans stood like sentinels along reedy marshes full of croaking bull-frogs. These were horrible abysses of shiny black mud, over which the waggon creaked and rolled on crazy planks which swayed about as if they had all the mind in the world to tilt into the air.

Then even this road, bad as it was, failed, and was replaced by a deep black earth which became at some places a rich adhesive mud, causing Colonel Ulysses, in spite of the most frantic swearing and licking, to drive very heavily indeed. At last they came to a place so appalling that even his genius could suggest only one solution of the difficulty.

‘I guess them hosses is about played out,’ he remarked.

‘I guess they have good cause to be,’ said Frank; ‘and what’s more, I guess that nothing on wheels can go down this ravine.’

‘You’re about right, stranger, so I kalkilate you had better get out, and leave me to git them up thar the best way I can.’

Nothing loath, Frank turned out, followed by the faithful Pompey, and began to scramble down the wild wooded banks of the ravine, when to his surprise the black boy came close up to him, twisting and wriggling about and looking unutterable things.

‘Massa,’ he said, in a low tone, ‘me hab seen dat man before.’

‘Well, what of that, Pompey?’

‘He bad man—pirate, robber, murderer, what you call tief.’

‘Oh, nonsense, Pompey.’

The poor fellow crept closer up to him.

‘Ah, massa, good massa, listen to Pompey. If you walue de life de good God gib you, put no trust in him. Him tief,

I tell you, him murderer, him friend of old massa in Cuba. I sall tell you him intend to rob, perhaps murder you, dis werry journey.'

'But, Pompey, how am I to believe all this?'

'Massa hab guns, hab volver in him belt—dat volver is load, him tink. Ho! ho! Pompey know dat gun no load.'

Without a word, Frank drew out his revolver and examined it—all the charges had been drawn.

'Now massa convince?' said Pompey.

'Yes, I am, Pompey; but forewarned is forearmed, and I can easily make this bosom friend snug again. And now, Pompey, can you handle a gun?'

Pompey drew himself up proudly.

'Handle one gun?—ah, massa, ever since I was dat high! Wid ole massa it was drill, drill, drill, shoot, shoot, shoot, all de day, and sometimes all de night too, till I get werry terrible tired; den massa praise me. "Nice leetle boy," him say, "dat Pompey, and de best black shot in de company." Ah, massa, me shoot, kill de leetle bird hopping in de bush; no miss man, him mosh bigger mark.'

'I am truly rejoiced to hear you are such a hero, Pompey; it may help us at the present pinch. Do you think our friend down there has recognised you at all?'

'No, massa; no more dan if me was de brute beast.'

'Come, then, let us go ahead! I hear him raving and shouting to the horses down there, as if he were a very bull of Bashan.'

'He is worsen dan any bull—worsen dan any bull!' muttered Pompey.

'Why stranger, I kalkilate you have taken your time to it,' shouted the valiant colonel, as they emerged from the thicket; 'here have I about bust myself, a swearing at them darned critturs, and now I guess they are more than about played out, and must have a spell of rest, so I reckon we'll fix off dinner straight;' and he produced from some hidden re-

ceptacle in the waggon a hunk of cold salt pork, a mess of cold boiled beans, a can of molasses and some dried apples. 'Now fall too,' he said, 'the food is good; I guess for a viangry chap it jist licks creation.'

Frank was not without misgivings, caused perhaps by the very dirty hands of the gallant colonel; but even he was forced to own that, sauced as they were with hunger, the viands were very tolerable.

Dinner over, the colonel guessed that he must hitch up them lazy brutes again, and having done so, the waggon was once more, by the united strength of the whole party, got under weigh, and Frank and his servant springing to their places, the journey began anew.

'Any game about here?' asked Frank, carelessly.

'Waal, yes, I kalkilate there's a deal, big and little. There's the prairie plover, not to go further; I guess that wol take the shine out of most of your birds, Britisher?'

'Look alive, Pompey,' said Frank, 'if you let so much as one prairie plover escape you, I'll punch your head, you rascal.'

Pompey grinned from ear to ear, and promptly responded: 'No fear ob dat, massa; Pompey shoot one little tiny fly, mosh more de ma—de bird ob de prairie.'

'I tell you what stranger, I be'nt agoing to stand that. It makes me kinder all overish, to have that black varmint sitting behind me with a loaded rifle in his hands.'

'Change to the other side Pompey,' said his master, 'and keep a sharp look out for these plovers; I will do the same.'

With that Colonel Ulysses Slouch turned his ugly mug full upon his companion, and asked, in his deep harsh voice, 'What be you afeard on, stranger?'

'I never said I was afraid of anything—I want a prairie plover for supper, that's all.'

'And you think yourself no small pumpkins at that game, too, I kalkilate, eh, stranger?'

'Do you mean, am I a good shot?'

'I guess you have about fixed me thar.'

'Well, yes,' said Frank, thinking it the best policy at such a juncture to do full justice to his own merits. 'I am a good shot—at least, I have always been considered one, and I have had plenty of practice.'

'Aye, among Britishers. Waal, it don't signify much, no how.'

With that Pompey fired, and taking clever aim at a small duck among the reeds, in a marsh they were passing, knocked it neatly over.

'My eye!' said the charioteer, giving a jump. 'The darned black varmint can shoot arter all. Waal, it don't matter, nohow;' and with that he sunk into a fit of obstinate silence, fidgeting about, however, from time to time, a good deal, and peering anxiously around him.

'My dear sir,' said Frank, 'can you not hurry your horses a little?—it is beginning to get dark.'

'It will be light enough, I reckon, to strike the trail,' rejoined the colonel in a dogged tone.

They were at this time travelling along a road to which Frank thought the worst sheep track in his native hills would have been preferable. Every now and then the waggon gave such a jolt that they were almost shaken out of it, as the stumbling horses came down almost on their noses on the soft black earth, rich with the *débris* of primeval forests; while he looked anxiously around, from side to side, his hand on his revolver, half expecting to see a robber start from behind every tree.

'I say, stranger, of what be you afeard?' grumbled the colonel. 'Answer me squarely now, if a Britisher can?'

'Why, of what should I be afraid?' said Frank.

'Oh, of Injuns, may be; but look yar, them Pagans have been quiet since Sam Baker wiped out better than a hundred of them last fall. Ah, a bell ox among sodgers is Sam Baker, I kalkilate.'

They had now come to an open natural clearing among the trees, a round precipitous hollow spot, something like a very

large disused quarry. A little stream flowed through the centre of it, glittering in the moonlight like a silver thread, and dashing with-mimic roar over a ledge of rock, forming a beautiful little waterfall.

'What an exquisitely lovely spot!' thought Frank; when Pompey, bending forward, suddenly touched his shoulder and whispered in his ear: 'Look right above, massa!'

They had now begun to climb the opposite bank; and looking up, he saw, with a start, right above him, standing out in relief against the moonlight, what seemed the gigantic figure of a man. He had a gun in his hands, and kneeling to steady his aim, he rested it across his knee. He could hear the click of the lock, when simultaneously there was a crash, a yell, and the colonel fell heavily against him. Something wet and warm came pouring over his hands. What was it?—blood? He had no time to answer the question, for Pompey called out loudly, 'Who dere, and what do you want?'

No answer.

'Me shoot, massa,' said Pompey, in a voice tremulous with excitement rather than fear. 'Me nick him in one, two, tree second.'

'Ulysses Slouch, you darned scoundrel,' growled a deep voice, 'can't you make a grab at that nigger varmint, now that I have wiped out the Britisher?' He was evidently quite unconscious of the fearful effect with which his shot had told upon his own ally, when bang went Pompey's rifle, rolling him neatly over upon his back, where he lay wheezing and coughing, till two dark figures, slinking up, lifted him softly and carried him off. As for the colonel, he never moved. Lifting him from the waggon, they laid him out on the grass.

'Me tink him dead, massa,' said Pompey, 'dead as one door-nail.'

'No,' said Frank, 'he is still alive,' and presently he opened his eyes, drew a long shuddering breath, and gasped.

'The luck is your's, stranger, I reckon, and Ulysses Slouch is a gone coon. Where is Whisky Jim—is he wiped out too?'

'If you mean de gentleman as was up on de bank, massa,' put in Pompey, with much urbanity, 'me hab de pleasure of one shot at him—him tumble over like de wild duck in de marsh.'

'Shove that cussed black varmint to one side, stranger, and come nearer—I want to say——' but here he broke off short with a smothered groan, and turning on his side, shrieked aloud in his agony, tearing and clutching at the grass with his teeth and hands.

'Bring some water, Pompey,' said his master.

'It is here, massa,' answered the kind-hearted black, beginning to whimper. 'Oh dear! to tink dat him one fellow-creature like one's shelf, well and strong as we not one hour since.'

Kneeling beside him, Frank tried to get him to take a mouthful of water, but the dying sinner was past any alleviation of his sufferings. Blood poured from his mouth, choking his cries of pain; his breath rattled in his throat; his face, always sallow and unwholesome, became of a ghastly blue colour; his features sharpened, and his struggles became gradually fainter—he was dead!

For a minute or two his intended victims stood gazing at him in awe-struck silence, and then Frank said:

'We cannot stay here all night beside him, Pompey. Let us get into the waggon and drive on somewhere.'

'Massa got one compass?' suggested Pompey.

'Yes, to be sure I have.'

'Den hab one look at it. Down in de city dere, dey say we go west. Pompey sure we come east.'

Taking out his compass, Frank looked at it carefully. Pompey was right; it marked due east.

'The villain,' he said, 'has no doubt led us astray for his own purposes. Well, we must turn due west. We may

perhaps come upon some house—who knows? The moonlight is good, and it is still early in the night.'

So saying, master and man clambered up into the cart, the horses jogged on, and they soon left behind them the beautiful moonlit ravine, now furnished with such ghastly memories. For some time they drove on in silence, and then Pompey, pointing to the south west, where a small cloud was just visible on the horizon, said :

'Massa, see dat leetle cloud?'

'Yes; but I don't see that it concerns us in any way, Pompey—the evening is beautiful.'

'Me no like it,' said Pompey, wistfully; 'but me no sure—me never here before.'

After this they jogged on in silence again for about half a mile, the horses keeping up a good steady trot, when suddenly, as it seemed to Frank, in a moment the little cloud spread out and took alarming proportions. It was no longer in the south-west, it was everywhere, turning the sky into an immense black pall, which seemed about to fall upon and overwhelm the earth. The wind, which had been blowing in gusts, now sank altogether into a dead calm, as if it were tired out and must have some rest, and the loud croaking of the frogs in the marshes ceased. Suddenly, in the clouds above them, the blackness rent asunder, and gave vent to a long liquid stream of fire; and peals of thunder, sullen but distant, rolled along the vast wooded plains.

'I thought it would come to dis, massa,' said Pompey. 'Now we jump down quick, unhitch de horses, and come under de waggon.'

It was now about ten o'clock at night. Unharnessing the horses, they crept under the waggon, Pompey burying his face in the grass and sand, while his master covered his head with a blanket. He could feel the negro beside him trembling from head to foot with terror. At last he said :

'Dis de last day, massa; massa hab larnin, say hook-prayer.'

Shuddering in spite of himself, Frank complied.

After all, was the negro wrong? Could the end of all things be more awfully fearful than the scene around them? The roar of the thunder seemed to split their ears. It crashed through space as if the whole vault of heaven were shivering into pieces, or collapsing like a crackling scroll. The lighting, vivid beyond conception, played around them in dazzling coruscations, blinding from their baleful brilliancy. Great hailstones, whizzing past like a shower of grapeshot, ploughed up the sand, and were succeeded by what had the appearance of a rain of fire. The angry heavens seemed in their fierce wrath literally to spout flame.

Drenched to the skin with water, which poured in cascades all around them from the sides of the waggon, they lay half-paralysed with fear and horror, in awful expectancy, for what seemed to them an immensity of time, but was in reality little more than an hour. Then the storm showed evident signs of abating, and they were anxiously consulting about the propriety of leaving their shelter, when shrill through the growling of the subsiding tempest came a long loud cry.

In spite of himself, Frank felt a cold shivering seize him; his very blood seemed to curdle in his veins, and he could have shrieked aloud if he had not been withheld by shame.

As for Pompey, he had no such acquired restraint: 'De dead man's cry!' he gasped. And then, uttering yell upon yell of the most deadly terror, he threw himself upon the wet sand, and dug his broad nose and hands into it as if he wanted to bury himself alive.

'Be quiet, Pompey man,' said his master; 'leave off that boo-hooing, and let me listen. Get up, I say;' and with some trouble he hoisted Pompey upon his legs, to his own cost, for the long melancholy wail ringing out again over the plain, the negro lost what little self-control he had left, and levelling his head, fairly ran it, in his ecstasy of fear, against his master's chest, sending him tumbling over into the sand, where he

presently threw himself again, grovelling as before upon his face, and making the welkin ring with his frenzied yells of terror.

Nearer came the sounds, no longer ominous, as Frank could clearly make out, but resolving themselves into the familiar cry of a waggoner to his team :

‘Git up, Bob, gee haw, Bess !’

‘Get up, Pompey,’ again remonstrated his master. ‘This is stark, staring madness. What you hear is not the cry of the poor dead wretch away in the hollow yonder—his torments are over—it is some man, belated like ourselves, urging on his horses.’

Pompey, at these words, regained sufficient courage to rise, but he was still in such a state of agitation that the merest trifle sufficed to throw him off his moral equilibrium.

‘Murder ! murder !’ he suddenly roared, ‘dere he is, dere behind dat tree ; me see de long blueish-white face of him. Oh ! massa, hide me, hide me !’ and in a fresh ecstasy of fear he dived head foremost into the waggon, and alighting, as bad luck would have it, right on the top of a small barrel of molasses, he crashed through the top of the keg, and stuck there head downwards, his legs and feet sticking right up into the air, and quivering convulsively, while from the interior of the barrel there issued a most extraordinary succession of wheezing, choking, half-grunting sounds, as if a dozen half strangled porkers were struggling in the sweet black depths of the treacle barrel. The moon was now shining brightly, and showed the approaching waggoner and his team.

‘Hillo, stranger, guess you’re fixed pretty considerable down there ?’

This Frank admitted, scrutinising meanwhile, as sharply as circumstances admitted, the appearance of the new-comer, who was a tall man with a square, stolid German face, and an honest look about him provocative of confidence. Behind him could be dimly seen a waggon with a pair of oxen. Altogether, he looked what he was, an honest settler, with a

considerable clearing in the forest; but even if he had looked the veriest cut-throat in the world, Frank felt he must have some assistance speedily, if Pompey were not to choke outright in the keg of treacle, so he confided the most urgent of his difficulties to his new ally, and each taking a leg, they soon had his sable retainer on his legs again, where he presented such an uncommonly funny spectacle, that the German could scarcely contain himself for laughing.

‘What de gentleman see to laugh at?’ gasped Pompey, trying to rub the sticky stuff out of his eyes; ‘de gentleman not behave well, none at all.’

‘Come up to my shanty and get some grub, and get yourself warmed, and the molasses washed off you; it’s only a step from here. Yonder, I kalkilate,’ pointing to a solitary pine, ‘is where my location begins.’

In a short time they had reached the cabin of their new friend, a rough abode of shingles, but with a roaring fire which put new life into their drenched shivering frames; then came supper, plentiful but rough—salt pork, roasted yams, and pumpkin pie.

‘Whar air you going, stranger?’ asked their host, after the great business of supper was comfortably concluded. ‘You kinder looked skeert, as if you had lost the track sorter, when I came upon you.’

‘In a sense I had,’ answered Frank, ‘or rather, I had been wilfully led astray;’ and then he told him his experiences with Colonel Ulysses Slouch, and also the melancholy fate of that individual, for whom, however, the German Yankee was inclined to make small moan.

‘I kalkilate,’ he said, ‘that that thar Ulysses Slouch is a reg’lar bad un; I’ve been a trifle oneasy myself when I met him in the bottom on a dark night; I have had, so to speak, experiences sorter unpleasant with him and Whisky Jem, experiences as I wouldn’t care to have over again, stranger, and so I ain’t a-going to cry my eyes out because he’s skedaddled for good.’

Next morning, on taking leave of their hospitable entertainer, Frank asked what was to pay for their night's lodging.

'Not a cent, stranger,' was the hearty answer. 'And what's more, I'll show you whar to strike the right trail for St. Louis, and then there's no chance of you losing it, I reckon.'

He was as good as his word, and meeting with no more adventures, they arrived in due time at St. Louis, where they left the waggon and the other property of Colonel Ulysses Slouch in the hands of the sheriff, and satisfied him as to the fate of that worthy, of whom they found he had been some time in quest, as he was wanted on a variety of charges, none of which he would now answer in this world.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PRAIRIES.

'We three hunters be,
Rangers that rove through the north country,
Lovers of ven'son and liberty,
That value not honours or money.'

ON reaching St. Louis, they made at once what purchases were necessary. These included, first, a small light waggon with a cover, two good mules, two good horses, a large dog of the retriever species, a portable stove, and a rifle apiece. Then came their wardrobe, a regular frontier rig, buckskin shirts, buckskin breeches, and waist-belts, with a brace of Colt's revolvers and a bowie knife stuck in each. They had, besides, broad felt hats, and Pompey had in addition a shirt of brilliant tartan, which he wore outside his other garments, and in whose bright colours he took an absolutely childish delight.

They afterwards wandered up and down the town, through

the narrow, irregular streets, admiring the handsome churches, the large warehouses and the pleasant verdant squares. Then Frank suddenly remembered, that he had forgotten a most necessary essential, of a trapper's outfit, namely, beaver-traps, so he went and procured them; and then Pompey remembered something even more essential and floored his master with the question: 'What we eat, massa?'

'To be sure, Pompey,' he said, 'I had forgotten that.' Then, remembering that his German friend had advised him to invest in pemmican, he went and bought a large quantity of it, and a barrel of flour, with a good supply of coffee and some sugar. Next morning they set off in the best of spirits, and after leaving the city behind them, entered upon a great grassy plain covered with clumps of trees, like a gentleman's park. They had no very definite ideas as to the course they meant to pursue, except the one guiding thought to keep due west till they came upon the feeding grounds of the buffalo, and then, later in the season, to some stream well stocked with beaver, where they could pitch their winter camp. They had with them a small tent, but as long as the weather was fine they had no intention of using it. The tilt of the waggon, or the over-hanging branches of a tree, would form a sufficient shelter at night, with the aid of the fire, which it would be necessary to kindle for cooking purposes.

Pompey, conspicuous in his gay shirt, his great lips puffed out with mingled pride and a sense of responsibility, drove the waggon, while two spare mules and one of the horses trotted behind, vigilantly guarded by the dog, whose name they found was Nero. Frank, mounted on the other, rode along as light-hearted as a school-boy, inhaling large draughts of the bracing exhilarating air of the prairies, and looking out for something more appetising than pemmican to grace their first supper table in the wilderness. In this he was more successful than he expected; in passing through a magnificent glade, several deer bounded off to a little distance, and then, coming to a full stop, turned and stared at

the intruders with an ill-timed curiosity, which cost the life of a fat doe.

On seeing her fall, Pompey uttered a loud, 'Yah! yah!' of triumph, and springing from the waggon, approved himself, then and there, a well versed woodsman. In less time than Frank would have believed possible, he had the animal skinned; then, making slits in the skin, he soon, by aid of a small piece of cord, had it drawn up into a bag; then, cutting up the carcase in a masterly fashion, he selected the prime portions, put them into the bag, and stowed it away neatly in the waggon.

'I confess, Pompey,' said his master, 'that I am only beginning to find out how useless I am—I could not have done that, now, to save my life; do you know you have given me a most useful lesson?'

Pompey grinned from ear to ear. 'Yesh, me tell massa him hab good sarvant in Pompey. He do all dat for ole massa, and get only de big oath, and de blow over de head, till de roof ob de mouth blow up almost; now me hab good supper to-night, massa.'

At sundown they unharnessed the mules and prepared to bivouac in a beautiful grassy valley; a stream flowed through it, shaded by tall oak and cotton-wood trees, and under one of these arboreal Titans they prepared to build their fire. Their first duty, however, was to unharness the horses, and these, at Pompey's suggestion, were hobbled, that is, their forelegs were fastened together with a piece of rope to prevent their straying, and they were then turned adrift to feed.

Plenty of wood, dry and sapless as tinder, lay around, and they soon had a fire large enough to roast an ox. Now Pompey was in his glory; like all negroes, he was a native born cook, and being something of a *bon vivant* also, he was determined, as he said, to produce a supper 'fit for one king.'

Taking several of the fat ribs of the deer, he impaled them each upon a sharp pointed stick, and set them to roast at the fire. He then kneaded some flour and water into a stiff pan-

cake, which he fried in lard, and lastly he boiled in a camp-kettle some coffee, strong and clear, and thus produced a supper which the most dainty of epicures would not have despised, provided he had ridden all day with the fresh delicious air of the prairies blowing cool in his face.

Frank thought it exquisite, and both he and Pompey made a most splendid meal, and then, as daylight was fading away, he took out his mother's Bible. To give it to him had been almost the last thing she did before they parted, and she had besought him with tears never to omit to read a small portion every night, as had been his custom at home. This promise he had sacredly kept, and had never failed to read a few verses, more or less, except when circumstances made it absolutely impossible. He had not failed also to derive from it that comfort and support which it never fails to yield to every earnest soul; but hitherto his study of it had been in private. Now he had with him this simple affectionate companion, and yet, with a reserve which was natural to him, he hesitated for a moment before he could make up his mind to allow him to witness or share the most sacred moments of his day. But his hesitation was only momentary; his better nature triumphed, and he brought out his Bible and Prayer-book. 'Come, Pompey,' he said, 'sit down beside me, and before we lie down to sleep, we will read God's word together, and together pray to our Father in heaven, who has so mercifully preserved us from many dangers.'

'Dat him Bible, massa,' said the negro, touching the book reverentially, as if it had been a spell or amulet, and then settling himself to listen, which he did very attentively, only echoing, with a deep groan, the last word of every sentence.

The shadows of night had now fallen, and Pompey, when the short solemn evening service was over, piled more logs upon the fire, spread a couple of buffalo skins at the foot of the tree, and arranged the saddle-bags for pillows. Then, without a thought of fear, he and his master lay down, wrapped them-

selves in blankets, and fell tranquilly asleep in the midst of the untrodden wilds.

Next morning they were awoke by a rare serenade of birds, and started up to find around them such a fresh pure beauty of the dawn as might have ushered in the first morning in Paradise. The transparent atmosphere, the freedom from ordinary every-day cares, the healthful activity which braced every nerve and made the blood circulate more freely in their veins, all filled them with a strange glad sense of enjoyment in the very act of living to which they had hitherto been strangers. Never had coffee tasted so refreshing or food so delicious as did the simple breakfast which Pompey spread under the overhanging oak.

Breakfast over, the mules were caught and harnessed to the waggon, Frank saddled his horse, and the cavalcade set off, with the spare animals following of their own accord behind.

As before, their course led through forest glades, magnificent scattered groves of fine trees and wide rolling stretches of grassy land, extending like an illimitable ocean of verdure far on every side to the distant horizon. In traversing one of these grassy seas, Frank Blake's attention was suddenly arrested by two large birds hovering in the air, and remaining stationary almost over one spot. Pointing them out to Pompey, the black immediately recognised them as turkey buzzards, and suggested that they should drive in that direction, and see 'what de big Jim Crows were after.'

'My own idea,' said Frank, urging his good horse a little in advance. As he came nearer, he could see a dark spot on the level plain, which gradually resolved itself into a small leafless blighted tree on which another turkey buzzard was perched. As he approached, he fired his revolver into the air, and the bird, rising on heavy wing, made a few slow circles round and round, and then settled down again. Coming up, he dismounted and fastened his horse to the dead tree. Beside him was a deep dark pit, from which a horrible stench

issued, and looking in, he could clearly perceive the putrefying remains of a large bear. He was just about to turn away in disgust, when an inarticulate gibbering sound issued from the depths of the foul charnel pit which at once arrested his steps.

'What on earth is it?' he said to Pompey, who had just come up.

'Whatever dis can be? What you tink, massa?' said the negro, scratching his woolly pate in bewilderment not unmixed with fear. 'You no tink it duppy?'

'What do you mean, Pompey, by that?'

'De ghost of Massa de Colonel. Oh, wurra, it mosh be. Oh, sweet Massa Frank, let him be, let him be. All person saye dat, the best ting to do wid duppy,' and throwing himself on his face, he squealed like a half-slaughtered pig.

'For shame,' said his master, 'there is no such thing as either a ghost or a duppy. Get up, Pompey, and help me. What is that in the corner there? It looks like a bundle of shreds of old leather.'

Here, with a mighty effort, the bundle rolled out from the foul dark recesses of the pit, and, as Pompey was of no use whatever, Frank jumped down and lifted it up on to the grass at the side. It was then seen to be a human figure—that of a man—but so worn, so wasted to a mere skeleton, as to be scarcely heavier than a well-fed child. His hands were clenched, and his body was bent almost double, his knees being drawn up to his chin; long hair matted with filth hung down over his face, and between these wild elf-locks his eyes looked out with an eager longing unearthly glitter.

'Water! water!' he gasped, in a hollow moaning tone, and in a moment Pompey, who had got over his fears as soon as he saw that it was a creature of flesh and blood with whom he had to deal, brought some water, with which his master mixed a little brandy, which he held to the blackened parched lips of the sufferer. With difficulty he swallowed a few mouthfuls, scarcely sufficient to moisten his dried up throat,

but it revived him. Gradually his hands unclenched, and he slowly stretched himself out, showing on both limbs large untended wounds. There was one also behind the shoulder, and at the back of the head and neck.

'I never thought,' said Frank, 'that I would so soon have to put in practice Dr. Sawbone's lessons. Go and bring me one of my shirts, Pompey.'

'One ob massa's lily-white shirts?' groaned Pompey. 'Who shall gib massa anoder here?'

'We don't need them here, Pompey, and this poor fellow does. Quick, out with it.'

'Eigh oh!' whined Pompey. 'It de sweet soft linen, wort more dan I can tell here, but massa, him know best,' finally producing the much-begrudged garment.

Then Frank set to work to cleanse and bind up the poor creature's wounds.

When he had finished, the sufferer opened his eyes and said, in a weak, plaintive voice:

'Stranger, if you are going to leave me where you found me, it would be kinder to kill me at once.'

'I am not going to leave you here,' said Frank. 'I will take care of you, rest assured of that; and now compose yourself and try to sleep.'

A look of satisfaction and contentment passed over the wasted face; he took one of his deliverer's hands in his own emaciated claw-like fingers, and made as if he would raise it to his lips, but he lacked strength to do so.

'Do you feel easier now?' asked Frank, with a smile.

'I feel cool and so comfortable,' and closing his eyes again, he fell asleep, while Pompey and his master, setting to work, reared over him a pleasant shady umbrageous booth of branches.

They had carried him some distance out of sight and smell of the horrible pit, into a wild romantic dell, bordered with lofty limestone rocks, and with one or two scattered trees. Here Frank busied himself in arranging the rifles, saddle,

waggon, and piles of baggage against the trees, or in front of the booth, and in piling up and kindling a fire to be ready for Pompey, who had gone to forage for the evening meal. He was an excellent shot, and seldom came back empty-handed ; but on this particular afternoon he returned not a little down in the mouth ; he had only been able to shoot a couple of wild turkeys, which he had tied together and hung round his neck, giving him a most peculiar appearance.

‘ Why, what an epicure you are getting, to be sure, Pompey,’ said his master. ‘ Roast turkey, I assure you, is not to be despised.’

‘ And de oder make leetle soup for sick massa,’ said Pompey. ‘ It will do de sick massa good, strengthen him poor stomach ; he be deaded outright if him no eat, massa.’

‘ You are right, Pompey, so let us have a brewing of the soup immediately—as strong as it can be made—and I will give him a mouthful every now and then.’

Under this regimen the patient speedily revived, his wounds began to heal, his shrunken muscles expanded, his shrivelled skin grew smooth again, his old wasted face young, and to Frank’s amazement, he took the form and appearance of a handsome man a little under thirty.

‘ What you must have suffered,’ he said to him one day, ‘ to have become what you were when I found you.’

‘ Faix, yes ; a lovely object I must have been, and food for the buzzards I should have been soon, but for your kindness, Blake ; and now, my darling, would you like to hear my little bit of a story?’

‘ With all my heart,’ said Frank.

‘ Well, to begin at the beginning, I am an Irishman, as you have no doubt found out.’

Frank nodded.

‘ But you don’t, you can’t know, that I squandered a good property before I was five-and-twenty, and then, somehow or other, although few fellows had been so popular as Dennis O’Brien, I found that when my last copper was gone, I had

not a friend left to bless myself with, and as I was ashamed to beg, and the prospect of starving was uncommonly unpleasant on a near view, I scraped together sufficient to pay for my passage and rig myself out, and came over here.'

'And how have you succeeded?' asked Frank, with eager uriosity.

'Uncommonly well; I like the life, and I have made money, if I could only have kept it; but it's been the old story more than once or twice, "What's bred in the bone—" eh? Hillo, blackie, what are you turning up the white of your eyes for, like a duck in a thunderstorm?'

'Blackie is not politeful—wery disrespectful of de sick massa,' pouted Pompey. 'Me Pompey Jockaloo myshelf, spectable coloured gentleman, Massa Blake's own man.'

'Arrah, yes, to be shure, and a handsome representative of the ould Roman general you are to boot. Hand me that mug of water, will you, my sable hero. You don't mean to let me die of thirst, do you?'

'No fear of dat, massa, if massa will only be shivel.'

'If not, it will be the worse for me, eh, friend Pompey?'

'It can't be for de betterest for massa. And now you tink me hab time to shoot one turkey for massa's soup, Massa Frank?'

'Unquestionably, Pompey; it is a work of mercy, and there is your compatriot Nero waiting to accompany you.'

'Nero have more sense in him black head than many that call themselves Christian gentlemen,' muttered Pompey, taking up his rifle.

'A good soul,' said O'Brien, looking after him; 'faithful as a dog, and all the rest of it, I am sure, and yet he has got such a provokingly ugly mug that I can't help teasing him a bit.'

'I should not wonder if you have made him so angry that you have spoiled his shooting for this afternoon, O'Brien.'

'By the Rock of Cashel I hope not, for I am as hungry as

a hawk. All that's happened to me hasn't spoilt either my taste or my digestion, that's one mercy.'

'But how did it all happen to you, that's the question?'

'I was just going to tell you, when that consated black-amoor sent me off flying at a tangent in another direction. How did it all happen? Well, this was how it happened, my dear. I took a fancy, for I have always, I am afraid, been something of a gastronome, for a little moose-beef. I am a good shot, although I say it myself—what they call in these parts a plumb-centre shot, and as nothing would serve me but to go a moose hunting, I took with me a birch bark horn, such as the Indian hunters use, and ensconcing myself snugly behind some bushes, I made the call echo over the woods. In a short time I heard a faint far-off sound, then a crashing in the distant underwood, and very soon a large moose emerged from the cover into the strip of open prairie before me. I had no time to lose, for a moose, as you will learn by experience, is one of the most shy and suspicious of the deer tribe. So, without more ado, I pitched my rifle to my shoulder and bagged my moose, and faix, I was glad of it, for I had been upon short-commons for a week, and had even been so hard up, that I had killed and devoured a skunk, and now, if I didn't have illegant visions of stews and ragouts, and I don't know all what, it's a pity. I was as merry as a cricket when I set off to bring up my horses to pack the moose-meat on. I wasn't long away, for hunger's a powerful sharp spur, to a fellow like me, at least; but long or short, I was all the time that was needed to make a slip between the cup and the lip. Back I came, and sitting there on my moose, who should I see but the biggest, grizzlyliest blackguard of a bear I had ever clapped eyes on. I can't tell you how riled I was. He curled up his lips over his teeth as I came up in a very ugly way, but I was mad with rage and disappointment. My dander was fairly up, and I never took time to look at his size.'

'My fine fellow,' says I, 'I'll teach you better manners, and

show you who that moose belongs to,' and so I seized my rifle and took a good aim at him, but I was in too great a passion to make a job of it, and I missed him. I had no chance to load again, for getting up off the moose, he came right at me, growling like a good one. I had only the empty rifle in my hands, but I gave him a ringing blow with it right over the skull.'

'And killed him?' asked Frank.

'Bless you, no, my poor innocent darling; who ever killed a bear with hitting him over the head? But it was all I could do, and I did it with such hearty good will, that I succeeded in stunning him. But it was only for a minute; he was up and at me again in a jiffey, more wicked than ever, wrinkling up his upper lip and showing his teeth, while his eyes, half hid by his shaggy hair, glowed like bits of live coal.'

'I would have made off, if I had been in your place, O'Brien.'

'My dear, it was too late—I was in for it; and what was more, I had a conviction that I was booked to win, and so I was, as far as that vermin was concerned. Well, we fought away for a few odd minutes more, and I half-stunned him again; when, just as I was coming what I meant to be a cropper, the ground gave way behind me, and down I went into that horrid hole which had so nearly proved my grave. I fell on the back of my head, and was so dazed for a minute or so, that I scarcely knew what had happened. What brought me to, was the savage brute biting at my shoulder, digging his long white teeth into the flesh till I fairly yelled with pain. "It's all up with you, Dennis, my dear," I thought. I tried to pull away from him, and turn over to save my face, but he only bit the deeper; at last, in the struggle, something fell out of my belt, and came with a rasping grit against a stone. It was my knife, that I had quite forgotten. "Och, thinks I, the game's not up yet, Master Bruin, so with your leave or without it, here goes." By good luck I had my right arm free, and I struck home with such force,

that I buried the knife in his body up to the haft, but missed the heart, and he let go of my shoulder with a growl of rage, and seized my right leg and mauled it fearfully. I struck at him again and again, but I was getting weak with pain and the loss of blood. Many times I forced him to let go, but he always made a fresh grab at me, till I felt as if he were eating me piece-meal. I could no longer see him distinctly; my head swam round; there was a mist before my eyes, through which I could just discern a huge black, growling mass, at which I made desperate lunges, and just as often missed, as not. "The black vermin has won after all, Dennis, my boy, but there won't be much to pay for funeral expenses, anyhow." That was my last conscious thought.

'How long I lay there I can't tell. When I revived, it was like waking up from some horrible dream. The sun had set, and the darkening sky looked for all the world as if it were making itself into a big winding sheet for me. I was one great gaping wound from head to foot. I was all torn and bitten over. By good luck, the brute was not lying on me, or I must have died, for I was so crippled that I could scarcely move. Only my right hand and arm were scarcely so bad as the rest of me. All night I lay there looking up at the sky. A bitter long night it seemed to me. What with the pain and the cold, I thought morning would never come. I must have gone mad, I think, then, if I could have known how many such nights there were before me.

'Day broke at last, and I was as glad and thankful to see it as if the daylight had been my best friend; and yet, when I thought it all over coolly, I knew it could do me very little good—the darkness and the light were much the same to me.

'The long day went on—no footstep broke the stillness. I had told myself that it was next to impossible that any one would come near me, but unconsciously to myself, I must have had some hope. I knew that, by the awful sinking of heart which came upon me when I realised that I must lie there in that hole, looking up at the pitiless sky above me, till

I died. Better a thousand times that I had been in the maw of the ravenous monster beside me !—it would have been at least a swift death. In a paroxysm of agony and despair, I tried to rise, and fell back helpless. The veins of my head and throat swelled as if they would burst. I opened my dry parched lips—I strove to speak—I tried to shriek aloud for help ; but no sound came, only a gasping, choking rattle. The dead bear lay beside me, with the blood still oozing slowly from its wounds. With all the little power of locomotion left to me, I crawled to it and made shift to suck the half-coagulated gore. With my teeth and one available hand I tore at the reeking flesh—I was past disgust. I ate with something of appetite, and life returned to me—a feverish distorted life, which was one intense pain. The blood at one moment felt like an icy stream of lead in my veins ; the next, it poured and gushed through them with the impetus of a hundred force pumps ; a loud buzzing filled my ears, my head seemed bound with a circlet of red-hot iron ; a thousand racking pains tore my poor tortured frame. I felt my judgment was leaving me, and no longer wondered that, intense as my sufferings were, I was strong—strong as with the strength of ten. The might of a Hercules pervaded my shrunken muscles and wasted body. I no longer felt my wounds—I danced, I sang, I raved, I mowed, I gibbered, I made the long nights and longer days hideous with discordant sounds, but no one came near me ; and through it all I never lost a curious self-consciousness—I could not restrain myself, but I knew that I had passed beyond my own control. Then came a dead blank, and then life again with death beside me—chained to it, wallowing in it. Oh, the ineffable horror of these last few days ! I shrank from it, I drew myself away from it. I curled myself up into a human ball, and watched the turkey buzzards hovering overhead, always coming nearer and nearer, till at last one almost brushed me with its loathsome wing ; but spent as I was, the feeble motion I was still able to make, frightened

it off. All acute pain had left me—I was reconciled to die. Life was so painful, that I could not help praying, as each night darkened down, that it might be my last ; but I was still strong enough to give way to a burst of petulant impatience, when morning broke and found me still alive. Gradually, but very slowly, as it seemed to me, I grew weaker, and then I dozed more, and dreamed of my old home, and the dear old country and mother's grave ; and then I thought I heard her call me. I opened my eyes, I made a desperate effort, I tried to pull myself together, I listened ; it was a voice—a human voice. I had never again expected to hear such music on earth. I could have wept, but my hot parched eye-balls were too dry for tears ; then you came and lifted me up, and you know the rest. Thanks to your more than brotherly kindness, I am now round the corner once more.'

'I am sure you are, O'Brien ; only I am afraid, when you are strong and well again, you will be thinking of leaving us.'

'Faix, then, I won't ; you saved my life, and so, if you'll have me for a comrade, I'll cast in my lot with you fast enough. You suit me, and I can be of use to you, for I have got experience, which you have not ; so it's a bargain—that is, if I suit you ?'

'You suit me as David suited Jonathan, so it's a bargain, as you say, only I am afraid all the advantage will be on my side.'

'Sorrow a bit of it ; here am I as weak as water, with my horses gone, one rifle smashed useless, and the rest of my baggage left all this time to the tender mercies of the prairie wolves. As soon as I am able to knock about, I must go in search of it.'

'I could almost pledge myself that Nero could take Pompey to the very spot where it is lying,' said Frank Blake.

'I should not wonder ; he has a good deal of sense, as blackie says, "in him black head," and I have heard of

retrievers doing as smart things, so to-morrow we will put Master Nero's sagacity to the proof.'

CHAPTER VIII

A HUNTER'S UPS AND DOWNS.

'Weariness can snore upon the flint, while restive sloth
Finds the down pillow hard.'

Cymbeline.

NEXT day Pompey, before setting out, showed the dog, with much formality, one of O'Brien's boots, chattering away to it as if it were a human being like himself all the while.

'Ah, Massa Nero, you see dis boot—him Massa O'Brien's boot—smell him well, my shild. Now we go look togidder for de oder tings; now, dis werry day. What you tink of dat, Nero?'

The dog gave a short abrupt bark, wagged his tail, and looked up into his black friend's face, as much as to say: 'Let us set off at once.'

'Yes, Massa Nero, we go in one leetle while; you no forget dat. Be quiet dere, you old stupid. Oh dear! oh dear!'

This exclamation was caused by Nero, who, in his anxiety to get away, had got up on his hind paws, and was licking Pompey's sooty face from ear to ear, uttering as he did so, a low impatient whine.

'Stop, Nero, stop, for dis one minute; look what you have done—de worstest you could do: spilled all de soup for Massa O'Brien's dinners. You hab no manners, you big black willain.'

'Here's an unexpected chance,' thought O'Brien; improving it at once:

'I am tired to death, Pompey, if you must know a secret, of that everlasting soup. The ribs of that last deer you shot look uncommonly appetising, I will just go in for them, I think, and so vary the *menu* a little.'

'Now you de foolis person, Massa O'Brien,' remonstrated Pompey, in his character of sick nurse. 'Massa niber mind, he is one sick person. Massa should say a leetle more soup, Pompey; him good for massa, trengthen him stomach—de roast venison bad—bad.'

'I say Quashie, no more of that, if you love me. Don't you know that it is as much as my life is worth to contradict me? A sick person like me should always have his own way.'

Pompey pouted his blubber lips.

'You do forget a leetle; massa, my name not Quashie.'

'Oh dear no; I beg your pardon, Pompey—how could I be so stupid. I am afraid my memory has become permanently weakened. Ah, here is Blake.'

His appearance closed the soup interlude, which was left an open question. Pompey and Nero trundled off together, and the invalid, suddenly changing his mind at the sight of a fine turkey his friend was carrying, declared he would have fowl to dinner.

In the afternoon Pompey and Nero returned in triumph with O'Brien's two horses, which they had secured, his rifle and a good stock of peltries, as furs are called out in the prairies.

In another week O'Brien had recovered his strength to a great degree, and with returning health his old restless habits reasserted their former power over him. By his advice the plans for the campaign were modified, and the march was resumed in a south-westerly direction, O'Brien promising them buffalo in a few days.

The weather meanwhile was beautiful—the temperature

was neither too hot nor too cold—the country through which they passed was well wooded and well watered, and so plentifully supplied with game, that their larders were always kept well stocked. One day, early in the afternoon, they reached the banks of a considerable stream, where they resolved to camp for the night.

‘I say, Blake, what sort of a gunner are you?’ asked his new friend; ‘I have never been out with you yet.’

‘I suppose I may call myself a fairish shot.’

‘But are you good at hitting birds on the wing?’

‘I have accomplished that feat once or twice in my life.’

‘There is my bird gun, then,’ handing him a smooth bore; ‘and now quick, my honey, smart’s the word. Skedaddle, and see if you can make a hand of these ducks. Pompey has promised to cook us a first-rate mess of them for supper to-night.’

‘All right,’ said Frank, taking the gun and sauntering off down the edge of the stream, along whose margin there were forests of tall reeds, affording good shelter for a fowler, and thickets of wild rice, the seeds of which are a favourite food with all aquatic birds. The ducks were plentiful, and he got several fair shots at them, so that by sunset, when he began to retrace his steps, his game-bag was so heavy, that about half-way up the stream he laid it down under a clump of bushes, and lighting his pipe, was about to indulge himself in a few meditative whiffs, when he felt something nibbling and pulling at the corner of the game-bag, and peering cautiously through the branches, saw a small, thick-set grey animal nibbling away at the corner of the bag. It did not seem in the least afraid of him, and its fearless familiarity appeared to his inexperience absolutely captivating.

‘It is evident, my little grey-coated gentleman,’ he thought, ‘that I am your first human acquaintance. Here at last I have gained a sanctuary as yet uncontaminated by the presence of the death-dealing rifle.’

And with that, and a great deal more that was very fine,

he went down on his knees, and bringing his face on a level with an aperture in the leafy screen, was watching with intense interest the movements of his fearless little visitor, when pough, puff—faugh! right into his face was squirted a shower of some horrible, sickening, intensely nauseous fluid. Rubbing his smarting eyes, he got up and shouldered his game-bag, and staggered along half-blind. He soon came within sound, if not sight, of the camp, a fact of which he was promptly advertised by loud shouts and intreaties to keep off.

‘Hillo, Blake, my darling, you have been and done it this time, and no mistake. Don’t move. Don’t come a step nearer. Faugh! all the perfumers’ shops in the world are nothing to you.’

‘But what is it?’ gasped the half-stified victim.

‘Skunk!’ responded Mr. O’Brien, solemnly; ‘skunk.’

‘But what must I do?’

‘Do? Oh, mother of Moses! spurt—splutter, choke. Keep away from me, man, and get into the water as fast as you can.’

‘But where is the water? I can’t see it—I have gone blind.’

‘Oh, never fear, you’ll get your sight back all right a precious long while before you are fit for society again. Here, Quashie—Pompey, where are you? Hillo! don’t you see your master, you villain?’

‘I smells him very well, massa; and now what we do next?’

‘Get him into the water as fast as possible. Hillo, there he goes?’ and as he spoke, poor Frank slipped over a bit of shelving bank into a dirty pool full of stagnant water, popping right under the thick green scum, and kicking and floundering about in it like an enraged hippopotamus.

‘Oh! oh! oh!’ roared Pompey, ‘massa be drowned,’ and he rushed to the side of the pool, holding his nose, however, with both hands.

'I suppose I must lend a hand,' grumbled O'Brien, 'but it's hard upon a fellow. Here, friend Blake,' and with Pompey's aid, he was soon pulled out and trundled down to the stream.

'Now, my darling, there you are in your bath, mighty genteel and comfortable, with Pompey at hand to scrub you, only the next time you go in for skunk, give us some notice, if you please. Ah, ye little fishes! I had meant to have some of you for supper, but there's no help for it. Pompey, you villain, why don't you scrub. You're not going to run away, eh?'

'Only to get one little breath of fresh air,' remonstrated Pompey, making a rush out of the water, and clapping both hands on his nose. 'Oh, massa, my nose blow up; my eyes smart till dem like one bat's. Massa Frank must never touch skunk again—never, never no more.'

'I never will, if I survive this,' said Frank.

'I'll answer for that, my boy,' quoth O'Brien; 'but, bless me, what a dose you have got! I question if all the perfumes of Araby, if you had them, will ever sweeten you again.'

'I must go into quarantine,' said Frank, 'that's clear. Come, Pompey, set a stout heart to a stiff brae, man; we are getting along famously.'

'Yes, massa, we most hab one leetle more wash, and den we get the better of dis lamentable haxident,' and he began to scrub away in double quick-time, but it was all no good—the clothes had to be abandoned.

'And fortunate for you,' said O'Brien, 'that you have another suit, and that the same odoriferous garments are not your best or only frontier rig. If a poor fellow like me chose to indulge in the luxury of skunk hunting, I might cry till I was hoarse, I reckon, "A suit!—a suit! my kingdom for a suit of clothes!" and there would be no response.'

'No more of that, if you love me, friend Dennis; and now may I come in?—I am sure I look drenched and forlorn enough.'

'I never saw such a disconsolate physiognomy, I think. Why, you look a regular Knight of the Rueful Countenance. And the ducks were canvas-backs, too, you melancholy good-for-nothing, do you know that?—the most illegant eating in the world, and spoiled entirely. I may forgive you, but if you have any conscience you will never be able to forgive yourself.'

'You don't mean to say the ducks are ruined too, do you, O'Brien?'

'I do; they have gone to pot, as truly as I am a gentleman, only not in the sense in which I meant them to do so.'

'And what is in the pot then, may I ask?'

'What is in the pot, eh? that's a good one! What can be in the pot except the old story, with a trifle of the last turkey, perhaps'—but, in a resigned tone, 'as you have got clean clothes and are endurable now, you may as well take the head of the table, and Pompey—Pompey, I say! Where is that sable ruffian? Pompey, you scoundrel, will you dish up these bones instanter, because if you don't, I'll treat you worse than ever Cæsar treated your namesake.'

'Never mind, let us make the best of it, O'Brien. After all, these tender juicy ribs of venison are no bad supper for a couple of chaps roughing it on the prairies.'

'Ah, but to think of the feed it might have been,' continued O'Brien, closing his eyes and gently swaying backward and forward, revelling in imagination in the lost delights of the canvas-backs. 'So juicy, so crisp, they literally melt away in one's mouth; and to think of a man with his bag full of such treasures going out of his way to interview a skunk—it is too absurd, it is absolutely too vile—my feelings overpower me when I think of it!'

'So do mine,' said Blake, laughing outright.

'Oh, you may laugh, but I can assure you that canvas-back ducks cannot be eaten at all seasons—that is, in perfection. You have perhaps lost your only chance of doing so.'

'Well, man, I don't care twopence if I have.'

'Bah ! I wish you would not talk such nonsense ; you cannot be really serious—no man in his senses can.'

Here Pompey appeared with a somewhat flurried look, and reported, 'Dere be something big and black, massa, moving far away on de plain, like one big ship far out at sea.'

In a moment O'Brien started up, all his affected languor gone, and ran to a little hillock, which afforded a good view of the level rolling prairie. For a few seconds he could be seen looking intently in the direction indicated by Pompey, then suddenly he took off his cap and flung it into the air with all the glee of a schoolboy, shouting, 'Hurrah ! Hurrah ! Buffalo at last.'

'Where?' cried Frank, catching for the moment something of his enthusiasm.

'There. Don't you see those black specks on the far horizon?—those are the bulls who feed on the outskirts of the herd. It is still at a considerable distance, but every day it will come nearer. All we have to do is to wait. We cannot find a more comfortable camping ground than this on the banks of Canvas-back River.'

'You have not christened it after your favourite dish, eh?'

'To be sure I have; and what is more, I am going myself in quest of these delicious ducks to-morrow. That is to say, if you have not frightened them all away, my darling.'

'I hope, for your sake, there are still some left, and as I mean to furnish our larder with choice tit-bits of buffalo, we shall fare like princes.'

'Buffalo humps and marrow-bones. Humph, not bad. So you are really going to shoot your first buffalo to-morrow?'

'I am going to try, at least.'

'Better take my horse, then. He is a trained buffalo runner, and if you do meet your buffalo, you will find his acquired instinct more serviceable than all your mother wit.'

'But is my own horse not as good ?'

'Quite,' said O'Brien, drily, 'only he is not a buffalo runner, and if you persist in taking him, I may as well say good-bye to-night, for I will be up early after my ducks to-morrow morning, and I don't expect to see you again, that's all.'

'You are a cool fellow, O'Brien.'

'Tolerably ; and what is more, I have lived too long in the world to be ashamed of saying my prayers, so you and Pompey need not clear out, as you do, so mysteriously every night, but just have the service here in this comfortable leafy booth he has erected for us.'

'Very good,' said Frank, summoning Pompey, and they held their vespers amid the grand old trees of the prairie, which rose around them stately and tall, like the polished columns of a cathedral. The red light of the huge camp-fire flickered athwart the overhanging boughs and flushed up against the darkening sky. The evening wind swept down through the tops of the trees in fitful wailing notes, filling in with its wild cadences the pauses in Frank's voice, while far off in the wilderness sounded the hoot of the lonely owlet and the dismal howl of the prairie wolf, mingling nearer with the shrill neigh of the horses, which were feeding in the grassy meadow beside the stream.

CHAPTER IX.

BUFFALO.

'Hunting gives us jocund health,
We envy not the miser's wealth,
But chase the stag or bounding roe,
And know delights he must forego.'

FRANK BLAKE was too much excited by the thought of buffalo to sleep much, and what fitful slumbers he had were

of the most uneasy and unrefreshing character. If he did doze off for a moment, he was sure to awake in a terrible fright, groaning and suffocated, and all but dead beneath the horrible load of a whole nightmare of buffaloes, amid gigantic horns, black monstrous shaggy bodies, and forests of short legs and hoofs, spurning the air, and twisting and twining and struggling in all directions. After one of these fearful visions of the night, in which he had with supernatural activity just dodged the kick of a patriarchal bull, he started up wide awake, and was at once conscious of a curious noise—a subdued, distant, but sustained hum, like the far-off wash of the waves on a rocky shore. Listening intently, he became aware that it was increasing. It grew more distinct; one moment he fancied that it was like the roar of fire, the next it seemed to him like the rush of water, and low and distant as it was, he became so anxious, as well as curious, that he resolved to rouse O'Brien at once.

'Roasted crisp and brown, it is exquisite!' murmured the sleeper, turning over to the other side.

'Hillo, O'Brien!' laughed Blake. 'Are you still at the canvas-backs, eh? Wake up man, and resolve me my riddle, for I am fairly puzzled.'

'Sage stuffing is the best, of course, but it can't always be had; wonder if wild sa-sa-sage would do?' droned the sleeping man.

'Dat funny ting, massa,' said Pompey, grinning from ear to ear. 'Massa O'Brien nice gentleman; werry good shot, werry great hunter, but mosh too fond of what him eat. Him tink of dat all day, him dream of dat all night too—eh, Massa O'Brien, de ducks all in de marsh—wake up!'

Upon this O'Brien sat up, rubbed his eyes, and with a loud yawn, demanded 'what all the row was about.'

'I hear a noise which I can't make out at all,' said Blake; 'get up, like a good fellow, and enlighten us novices as to its cause.'

'Zounds, man! let me have my snooze out in peace, will

ye! I could bet ten to one it is only the skunk you were so uncivil to last night. Get away to your beds, and leave me alone, I a-a-a-m——' a loud snore.

'Come, O'Brien,' said Blake, seizing him by the shoulder, 'you must get up, although you were as sleepy as Morpheus himself; this is no laughing matter—it is the roar of fire or water, I can't make out which.'

'Could not you have said so at once, and not stood chattering there about skunks and canvas-back ducks, and I don't know all what?' said O'Brien, springing up at once. 'I suppose you have not looked at the river?'

'No; what can ail the river?'

'A freshet on the head waters, which may send it down in flood, and then woe be to us! for our camp is pitched a precious sight too near it for safety.'

'Convenience was all we looked to,' said Frank, 'but to all appearance there is nothing wrong with the river; it is quite in its normal condition.'

'That is all right then; now let me see. If the prairie were on fire, we should be sure to see the glare reflected on the sky, and this sound comes with the wind; and as I live, from the direction in which we saw the herd feeding only yesterday, it is a buffalo stampede. We are lost, we shall be ground to powder, we shall be trodden out as flat as pancakes; oh dear! I have lost my last chance—I shall never eat canvas-backs again.'

'Oh deary, deary me!' sobbed Pompey, taking up the lamentation in his turn. 'Oh deary me, dat is de worstest dat can happen!' and he began to sob and cry aloud, like a child.

'But is there nothing that can be done?' said Frank. 'Surely we have not just got to fold our hands, and sit still till these brutes run over us?'

'A fire sometimes turns them out of their course, and makes them swerve a little, and sometimes even that won't stop them; but it's our last chance, and we can try it.'

'Quick, Pompey!' shouted Frank. 'Your hatchet, man. We have a chance left yet. Quick! let us work like Titans.'

And soon all three were hewing away at the underwood, shearing off great bundles of twigs and brushwood, which they piled above the embers of their fire, sprinkling morsels of fat and tallow upon it, until it kindled up, and shot into a ruddy column of flame.

Meanwhile, the noise was every minute becoming louder, until at last it resolved itself into the thundering gallop of thousands of hoofs.

The night was dark, which made their situation more appalling, for they were unable to distinguish, except by the sound, the precise direction in which the living avalanche was advancing. Pompey climbed up into the branches of a gigantic cotton-wood tree, and peered wistfully into the darkness.

'Can you see nothing, Pompey? In the name of Mumbo Jumbo use your eyes, man.'

At any other time Pompey would have resented this allusion, but at present he was much too anxious and alarmed to show fight.

'No, massa, no,' he wailed, 'me yeerie more dan enough, but me see noting, dat de trute.'

The noise was now terrific beyond description; the air around them seemed to quiver with sound, the earth trembled under their feet. As they stood beside their fire, and piled fresh fuel upon it with trembling hands, they felt their hearts jump against their ribs, and the perspiration stood in great drops on their foreheads. Then came the splash and dash of water; the pioneers of the herd were crossing the river just below the camp, but would the main body follow exactly at the same place?

'Throw a handful of powder on the flames,' said O'Brien.

'All right,' said Frank.

But Pompey, in his zeal, had nearly made it all wrong, for he threw so much powder on the fire, that it went up with a



'Your hatchet, man ! We have a chance left yet !'

[Page 88.]

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fluff, throwing a shower of sparkles up into the dark sky. Then Pompey, slipping backwards in his fright, turned a succession of somersaults down the steep bank, and shouted out, as loud as he could bawl: 'Oh, massa, sweet massa, dear Massa Blake! Help! help! Catch hold of me, de brute beasts is roaring and rushing over me. Me tink me dead, me killed, me murdered! Oh deary me! deary me! Sweet massa, for de lub ob heaven, help dis poor black boy!'

'Let him bawl,' said O'Brien; 'the more noise he makes the better, and he is not likely to come to any harm.'

But Frank, more tender-hearted, groped his way down the bank and found the valiant Pompey safe and unharmed at the bottom, lying prone along the ground on his face, kicking violently, and shouting for help in stentorian tones.

Catching hold of him, Frank dragged him up to the fire again in a pitiable state of terror, and plumped him down beside it, and then turned to O'Brien, who was still working tooth-and-nail feeding the flame from the piles of branches and brushwood. The noise now was absolutely deafening: the loud roaring of the bulls was answered by the lowing of the cows, while the chaos of sound was still further swelled by the trampling tread of thousands of feet, by the splash of the water, and the crumbling fall of masses of the steep bank as the huge animals forced their way up it. Hour after hour passed, and still the same interminable multitude of shaggy indistinct forms surged past in thousands, and the trappers, standing beside their fiery pillar of safety, looked on in wonder.

'Faix, I believe the whole stock on the prairies is under-way to-night,' said O'Brien at last. 'Stand clear, Blake, my darling, and cut me another handful of fuel; my life upon it, but they will bother us yet.'

'I never saw such a sight in my life,' said Frank, dragging forward a large branch.

'I believe you, my boy! I never did, and I have seen many an awe-inspiring one; but we are getting to the end of

the procession now, I think, and it's about time, for a more sorry plight for two gentlemen like you and me to be in, I cannot imagine. There go the last of the beauties, floundering and walloping about in the muddy bed of the stream like moving mountains, and my poor canvas-backs, where are they? With the swallows of the summer or the last year's snow, by this time.'

Here Pompey interposed in a tremulous, shaky voice, his teeth still chattering with fear and cold combined :

'Did massa tink we might dare to hab breakfast?'

'Mercy on us!' cried O'Brien, in feigned surprise; 'is that you, Pompey, or your ghost? I heard you groaning and shouting under the feet of the buffaloes some time or other in the small hours of this blessed night, and made sure that you must have been crushed as flat as a pancake a long time since.'

'Massa no speak of duppy, no know where him drop from,' and he looked so scared at the word, that in his dismay and bewilderment he fairly toppled over on his nose amid the glowing embers.

'Why,' said O'Brien, fishing him out, 'you don't mean to serve us up yourself for breakfast, do you, Pompey? We are not so hard up as all that yet, although the canvas-backs are gone for this turn. Be off with you, and turn us out something nice.'

Pompey obeyed, and soon a tolerable breakfast smoked before them.

'And now,' said O'Brien, 'you can have your first day at buffalo, Blake, as you proposed last night, and as my canvas-backs are gone, I don't mind joining you.'

'Agreed,' said Frank, 'and as you of course take your buffalo runner, I must take my chance. What, may I ask, are the special advantages of a buffalo runner?'

'Simply these: a buffalo, like, I believe, all animals of the ox tribe, makes, when brought to bay, a thundering charge in a straight line, and the buffalo runner is trained to evade this charge by a sudden spring to one side.'

‘That is an evolution which a good rider, I think, might force an untrained horse to perform.’

‘Very easily, if he can retain his nerve and presence of mind when face to face with the buffalo, but that is precisely what a novice very seldom can do.’

‘Well, I can only try, and fail if it comes to the worst; and I have a sufficing consciousness that I won’t, for, if you must know the truth, I rather pique myself upon my good horsemanship.’

‘You are a capital horseman, friend Blake, but——’

‘But me no buts, as King Ricardo used to say—I beg his pardon, his specialty, I believe, was ifa. I hate these disjunctive conjunctions—they are always coming in the way precisely at the wrong place, to quench a fellow’s spirits and muffle his dearest hopes up in a wet blanket.’

‘Why, Blake, you are positively gay this morning—the reaction from the anxiety of the night, I suppose; and now we had better look after our horses, I reckon—it is no joke stalking buffalo.’

CHAPTER X.

AN ANXIOUS MOMENT.

‘Why need the bridge be broader than the flood?
The fairest grant is the necessity.’

THE horses were soon caught and saddled, and Pompey came running up out of breath, with a turkey suspended by both legs round his neck.

‘Oh, Massa O’Brien! oh, Massa Frank! what you tink?—buffalo one, two, three, four, feeding in de meadow over dere beside de wood; dem look like great black hills in de green grass.’

'We had best separate,' said O'Brien. 'Look how excited my horse is getting; he is actually trying to force his way through this impervious thicket. Steady, old fellow, steady, you'll get at them soon enough. As for you, Blake, you had best keep behind that skirt of wood, and watch your opportunity for a chance shot.'

'All right,' said Frank, riding slowly to the spot indicated, and posting himself well behind the cover. The trees around him were very close, and the underwood so dense and high that he had unconsciously, as he rode along, passed a bull which was feeding at a little distance from the others. His first indication that anything unusual was near was the uneasiness displayed by his horse, which curveted about, snorted loudly, and made several abortive attempts to dash away, showing, by his pricked-up ears and impatient movements, every symptom of aversion and alarm.

And no wonder, his master thought, for the next moment there emerged from the underwood the most diabolical object he had ever seen, in the shape of a stupendous buffalo bull, frantic with rage and fear. His horns, long and black, swept up in a huge curve from beneath a shaggy frontlet of black hair; his small red eyes glowed like fiery coals; his tufted tail, quivering with rage, was whisked about in the air; and with a bellow which seemed to shake the surrounding hills, he made a furious charge, his head lowered, his mouth open, his long red tongue lolling out.

Frank was so taken by surprise that he entirely lost his self possession, and sat motionless as a statue, to all appearance resolved to await the tremendous onset. Fortunately for both, the instinct of self preservation was more active in his horse, which made, untaught, the very evolution required of a buffalo runner. Wheeling sharply round as if its hind legs were set on a pivot, it made a wild spring to one side, and saved itself, but landed its master right on the lowered head and curved horns of the buffalo. For about five feet he was thus borne aloft by the infuriated animal, which was tearing

along at a terrific pace, then with a tremendous toss of his head the bull rid himself of his strange burden, and Frank, panting with terror and excitement, felt himself rebound like a cricket ball, and then fall all in a heap into a clump of tall hemlock. At the same moment a rifle shot rang through the air. The buffalo, which had been pawing the ground, sniffing the tainted air, and turning its fierce glowing eyes all around in search of its prey, suddenly stood still, a quivering tremor shot through its huge frame, it turned, tottered forward slowly for a few paces, and then, falling on its side, rolled over and expired.

Immediately after O'Brien appeared with a scared, anxious face, and looked all round him in a perplexed manner, as if he did not see something he had counted upon.

'Mother of Moses, but this beats all creation hollow,' he muttered. 'What can the brute have made of him? They are not carnivorous—not, at least, that I ever heard of, and besides, it had not time to eat him all up.'

'Help! help!' cried Frank, in a voice that was somewhat weak and quivering, despite of all his attempts to make it firm.

'With the greatest pleasure in life, my dear fellow,' responded O'Brien; 'but where are you? I came here for the express purpose of gathering up any of you that might be left.'

'I am here, pitched into this bank of hemlock.'

'You might have had a worse bed, honey; but how much of you is left?'

'About the whole of me, I think; but I feel uncommonly weak and sore all over.'

'Faix, I don't wonder at that; I never expected to see you move again. Can you stand?'

'Yes, and walk a little, after a limping fashion.'

'Very good; come along then, and I will help you back to camp, and get hold of that nigger to lend me a hand with the meat.'

'Is he in good condition?' asked Frank, scanning his fallen foe with much interest.

'First-rate. He is a prime buffalo bull, in splendid condition; we won't want sundry savoury adjuncts to our hunter's fare to-day.'

It was not without difficulty that Frank managed the short journey back to camp, and when he got there, he felt as if every bone in his body were aching; he was, besides, so cold that his teeth chattered like a pair of castanets, and his knees knocked together. Pompey, when he came home, made a large fire, and he lay down close to it with all the available blankets and wraps piled over him, and was plied first with warm soup and then with warm coffee, till at last the chill went off, leaving a feeling of helpless prostration, but no sickness or other discomfort, and when at last he fell quietly asleep, O'Brien declared, with a look of relief, that he would do now, he reckoned, but he would require something delicate and nourishing in the way of viands—'and so, Pompey, you and I must start fresh and early to-morrow morning, and catch him a dish of frogs.'

Pompey laughed outright.

'Oh, massa, not de big bull-frogs in de marsh?'

'Yes, Pompey, just these noisy gentry; they are croak, croak, croaking round us day and night, as if they were saying, "Why don't you come and catch us, gentlemen?" and I can avouch them good eating—tender and delicate as chicken, but with a superior flavour.'

'But, massa,' expostulated Pompey, in a doleful tone, 'me tink my Massa Frank no like frog—heavy on him tomack. De turkey soup trengthen him more, Massa O'Brien.'

'You black villain! you unmitigated sable rascal! will nothing serve your turn but to contradict a gentleman like me, with a very fair knowledge of physic and surgery to add to my other accomplishments? I tell you frogs are nourishing and salutary—well fitted to recuperate his flagging energies—and frogs he shall eat, and you shall help me to catch them, too.'

‘Ugh! Oh, massa!’ cried Pompey, all agape and confounded by the long words; ‘Massa sabe de best, betterer den me.’

‘Unquestionably, Pompey, and so that question is settled.’

Merrily croaked the frogs that night, unconscious of their coming doom, but with the morrow’s morning light their Nemesis awoke in the person of Dennis O’Brien. Day broke bright and clear, full of the promise of life and happiness, the frogs no doubt thought, to all created things. A mellow balmy breeze kissed into tiny ripples the shallow reed-fringed pool, from which their deep-toned vespers were hoarsely ascending to heaven, when suddenly on the bank the great O’Brien appeared, with the reluctant Pompey behind him, bearing a capacious tin basin. He himself was armed with a long rod, at the end of which dangled a few inches of string to which a hook was attached, to which in turn was lashed with a piece of fine twine a fragment of one of Pompey’s much-prized red flannel-shirts. He watched it mournfully—it was to him a novel bait, and perhaps he had a forlorn hope that the novel fish would not bite. If he had, he was doomed to disappointment. O’Brien approached the marsh, and cautiously dangled the lure before his intended prey. Quick as thought a croaker made a greedy leap forward and swallowed it, and was jerked up for ever out of the reedy pool.

‘Now, look here,’ said O’Brien in a low tone, ‘the hind legs only are eaten, and they must be skinned immediately. This is how you do it,’ and he went through the operation with much dispatch and precision, Pompey, the while, watching the *modus operandi* with a most rueful countenance.

When sufficient frogs were procured, he was despatched to cook them, with the most awful threats if he should divulge the secret of what manner of creatures they were.

‘And how me cook dis frog, massa?—me must hax dat.’

‘I leave that to your own discretion, Pompey. You are a

first-rate *chef de cuisine*, and have cooked chicken, I dare say, many times.'

'Ugh—yes, massa.'

'Well, any way that does for chicken will do for frog. Do you twig that?'

'Well, old fellow, how do you feel?' said O'Brien, when they met at breakfast an hour later, for the frog-catching had occurred almost at the break of dawn.

'Jolly,' answered Frank. 'A night's sleep has done me all the good in the world: my head feels clear again, I can walk tolerably well, and my hand is steady, and best of all, I feel very considerably appetized for this beautiful breakfast of Pompey's.'

'Yes, it does seem a goodish spread,' observed O'Brien, eying it critically. 'All the delicacies of the season.'

'Have a can of coffee, eh?'

'Thanks; and I will take some of that chicken too, Pompey. How beautifully white and delicate it looks. Where did you contrive to get a hold of it?'

'Pompey, you villain!' said O'Brien, sternly, 'do you not hear what your master says to you?'

To all this Pompey answered never a word, but with his great mouth all agape, held out the tin dish containing the stewed frogs, making an inarticulate sound the while, as if he were half choking.

'Hand the dish over to me, Pompey; and look alive man, if you can.'

But Pompey's faculties seemed paralysed, and Mr. O'Brien had to act as his own waiter, which he did without delay, and helped himself to a liberal allowance of the chicken.

'This is really very fine indeed,' said Frank. 'Some species of prairie fowl, I suppose. Did you shoot them, Pompey?'

'Me! oh—oh, wurra dat,' stammered Pompey, his self-control giving way, and falling into an hysterical ecstasy of laughter. 'Oh, oh! dat no chicken; oh, oh, oh! me cannot do de shivel ting, me must go away.' And he vanished into

the background, where glimpses of him could be had, dancing and jumping, and tumbling down, and rolling over on the grass in ecstasies of suppressed laughter.

'He has not got over the buffalo night yet. It has gone to his head, I am afraid,' drawled O'Brien. 'But what has come over you, Blake; you seem in a brown study?'

'Where did this chicken come from, O'Brien?'

'From the prairies, man. Do you think I would humbug you about such a trifle? You had best take it easy to-day, I think? As for me, I am going to have a day of regular hard work. First, I am going to scrape and tan my buffalo-skin, Indian fashion; a simple process, as you will perceive.'

'Yes, it looks by no means difficult.'

'And yet, like very many easy things, there's no end of bother until you have caught the knack of it, and even then you are by no means cock-sure of success. Sometimes I succeed, sometimes I do not. And now give a guess, if you can, what I am going to do next?'

'I have not the least idea.'

'I dare say not. You have never had such hard lines as I have had. Necessity has been, in my case, as in that of others, the mother of invention. Why, man, I can sew, and that is about the only thing that I learned when I was a boy that I have found of much practical value in my rough life. Of course, you will have observed, although you are by no means bright, that a fashionable tailor is not to be found at every turn in the prairies?'

'I own to the impeachment—I have observed that, and thought with some concern of where a new supply of garments was to come from.'

'Thank your stars then, my boy; you are only beginning to find out your blessings. I can make trousers. Yes, I, Dennis O'Brien, late of Clonakilty Castle, and at present of nowhere in particular, can turn out a pair of pantaloons.'

'You are joking?'

'Never was more serious in my life. It's a great fact.

One must allow for difference of taste, of course. Some people might prefer a London tailor, a mere error of judgment, I conceive, but I would not give a fig for that man, or his opinion either.'

'And how do you proceed?'

'I lay down first this fine buckskin, then I take up this fragment of white clay, then I lay my hunting-knife handy—for I have no shears—and then I proceed to study the subject thus:' and he went down on his knees, and with lips rigidly compressed, and forehead shrivelled into anxious puckers of care, steadfastly regarded the piece of buckskin.

Frank continued to talk to him, making pauses in his conversation to allow of an answer, but none came. O'Brien, intent upon his tailoring, was mute as a stone, till suddenly with a grand flourish he seized the knife, and shouted out: 'Behold, I cut——'

But in this he was mistaken. 'Man proposes, but God disposes,' is as true of trifles as of events of great importance. He was still waving about the knife in the air, when Frank's attention was attracted to a great bank of murky clouds away to the windward, up to which a dull red glare was creeping athwart the darkening sky, while the whole atmosphere was filled with a sort of lurid glow.

'Hillo!' he cried, starting up; 'I say, O'Brien, what is going to happen next? The world seems on fire.'

'The prairies are, at least,' said O'Brien, jumping up quickly from his squatting position. 'Faugh, the smell of burning is sickening, and just when I was going to set about this great undertaking, too, and had all the affair well sketched out in my head; it is absolutely vile.'

'But do you hear the noise? it is like the hum of a large city. What are we to do—cut for it and run, eh?'

'No, you greenhorn. We must go at once, and set fire to the grass away to the leeward there, and we must be quick about it too.'

'Pompey! Pompey! Are you there?'

'Yes, massa,' answered Pompey, looking absolutely blue with terror. 'Oh, deary me, what we do now? we be burn up immediately! Oh, deary me, deary me, dis be de worstest of all!'

"Live and learn," that's your motto, Pompey. Make off and set fire to the grass, and your master and I will go each in another direction, and do the same. We must burn a circle all round our camp, and then we shall be quite safe; the cleared ground presents an impassable barrier to the fire.'

The flames they kindled soon spread all around, and then they turned their attention to the horses. They had been previously secured, and now seemed mad with terror. With starting eyeballs, and widely expanded nostrils, they plunged and kicked, and tore madly at their halters, lashing out, rearing, and throwing themselves in wild frenzy from side to side, in their efforts to tear themselves loose, that they might get free, and save themselves from the danger they felt to be impending by flight.

With no little trouble the terrified animals were secured, and, to keep them quiet, blankets were thrown over their heads.

Thick vollying clouds of murky smoke now came rushing down on the wind, the precursors of the line of fire, carrying along with them great flights of frightened birds. Then one or two animals came hurrying past, with uncertain steps, as if they did not know in what quarter to seek for safety; the pioneers, as it proved, of a mighty host, who followed fast after them, exhibiting every sign of uncontrollable terror.

First, came a herd of buffalos, most of them very fine bulls in prime condition—scurrying on at the utmost speed of their heavy lumbering gallop. Their eyes were distended, their nostrils were widely stretched, their shaggy coats were soiled with sweat and earth, their every movement showed, in spite of their still undiminished speed, that their energies and strength were flagging in the fearful race.

Then came herds of deer, moose, black-tailed deer, and the graceful wapiti, with one or two big-horns lumbering in their

rear. Mingled with these, and running alongside of them, but taking no more notice of them than if they had been so many trundling hoops, were squadrons of prairie wolves, followed by a detachment of tall, strong-limbed grey mountain wolves. Intent only, like their smaller brethren, on escaping from the pursuing flames, they looked neither to the right side nor to the left, no more regarding the presence of human beings than they did the multitudes of their natural prey who swarmed on all sides of them, converted for the moment, by dint of a common danger, into brethren in flight.

Last of all came the fire, a grand and striking sight, lighting up the whole sky with its lurid glare, licking up, as it advanced, every tree and shrub, and every particle of grass, climbing to the tops of the tallest trees, spreading right and left, and breaking into a thousand sparkling sheafs of flame. It was a spectacle at once solemn and awe inspiring, but O'Brien eyed it with philosophic indifference.

'I may as well patch up my old raiment,' he said, 'for my new inexpressibles won't be ready for many a long day to come. We must strike camp to-morrow, Blake, and make a start for Cedar Creek and the beaver country.'

'Could we not linger a little longer here?' suggested Frank.

'And starve,' was the laconic reply. 'Take my word for it, we will find this a land of Goschen no longer; and now let us sup while we can, and turn in.'

He was right: they had escaped the fire, but not its consequences. It had, in truth, done them an irreparable injury; game of all kinds, quadrupeds and birds, had alike disappeared, and they were reduced to the very shortest of short commons. The very frogs in the reedy pools along the streams had been scorched to death—nothing remained, wherewith to mitigate the pangs of hunger but a few handfuls of Indian corn, which they had to share with the half famished horses.'

A ration of this, sternly restricted to famine allowance, and stewed with a little water, did not prove, as may be supposed,

a very appetising meal, even to the hungriest of men, and what was worse, it did not support the strength.

Sometimes a stray deer would be seen, and then they would all turn out after it, often spending weary hours of fatigue and exposure without obtaining the least compensation in return. The game had been so thoroughly scared, that they kept well out of the range of the guns, so that the hungry men had to gather in at night-fall over their little bit of fire and their cheerless supper, utterly worn out with fatigue, their strength and spirits alike at the lowest ebb.

There was no more heart for fun. Suffering is proverbially no sweetener of the temper, and it was with much ado that the comrades preserved to each other the courtesy and mutual consideration of Christians and gentlemen. As for Pompey, his strength and spirits entirely gave way.

‘Dis shild no more good,’ he said, plaintively. ‘Hunger one berry great king—Pompey no more trength dan a broken reed.’

Great, therefore, was the rejoicing one evening when Frank, with a lucky shot, brought down a couple of owls, who were doing their best to make the night hideous.

O’Brien’s moody face brightened when he saw them. He could not bear to let them out of his sight even for a moment; having seen them plucked and cleaned under his own careful supervision, they were plumped into the pot, and the little party, smiling once more, gathered round the fire to await with what patience they could the coming feast.

At last Pompey, who had plucked up a little spirit at the sight of meat, pronounced them done. They were dished up, and O’Brien, with a flourish of his hunting-knife, proceeded to act as carver.

Alas for the promised treat! Manfully he hacked and hewed, and at last, after a great deal of labour, succeeded in dissecting one of the birds and distributing a portion to each of his hungry companions. In silence each morsel was received, in silence each set of grinders closed over the long-desired dainty, but all

attempts at mastication completely failed. The owl was tough beyond all possibilities of toughness which even the wildest imagination could have conceived. It was stringy, sinewy, unmasticable as leather, and its flavour was unspeakably vile. Blake and O'Brien threw down their portions in disgust, and turned with what philosophy they could to the watery mess of Indian corn, but Pompey struggled long with his unsavoury morsel. Big tears of disappointment rolled down over his black cheeks, but even he had to give in at last.

'Me no got trength enough,' he said, plaintively; 'jaw too weak.'

That night was a very trying one to all of them. Hungry, cold, and drenched with the pelting rain, their spirits sank to zero. They slept but badly, and early in the morning, at the first break of dawn, O'Brien got up.

'This cannot go on any longer,' he said; 'we must have some grub,' while Pompey and his master sat up and rubbed their eyes, Pompey complaining, in a melancholy tone, 'that he had a sinking feeling in him tomack.'

In less than half-an-hour O'Brien returned.

'There,' he said, with a laugh which was hysterical from weakness, 'There is something wherewith to satisfy our hungry cravings.'

'What is it?' asked Frank.

'A porcupine,' answered O'Brien, 'and a fine fat one too. Make haste, Pompey.'

'Ha! ha! ha!' laughed Pompey, in an hysterical frenzy, throwing himself down beside the camp-kettle, and shouting and laughing and crying by turns, as he grovelled in the ashes of the spent fire. 'Ha! ha! ha! me eat meat again. Me, Pompey Jocaloo, eat meat again.'

'If you don't get up, you black caterpillar, and skin that porcupine—aye, and stew it too, within a reasonable time, I shall eat it as it is, all myself.'

This awful threat brought Pompey to his senses, and very

soon the porcupine was simmering in the camp kettle, and sending forth a savoury delicious odour.

Oh, what a blessed porcupine that was—juicy, succulent, tender as a sucking-pig! How the hungry hunters revelled in the delicate flesh—and what different men it made of them in a few minutes! It weighed full twenty pounds; but they were so low in flesh and spirits, so weak, so empty, that they almost devoured it bodily at the first sitting.

Frank, mindful of past privations, wished to put a little aside for future emergencies, but his provident impulse was overruled.

‘No, no,’ said O’Brien. ‘Let us have the luxury of feeling satisfied once more. There’s Pompey not half done yet.’

Pompey grinned his old happy smile.

‘Just one leetle bit more, massa; one leetle bit will do.’

They were now getting out of the zone of the fire—consequently their worst days were over, and the porcupine proved the harbinger of returning plenty. The poor horses began also to find a little more food, and altogether their prospects looked brighter. Only a few of the larger game were as yet visible, but wild fowl began to hover around them with a boldness which showed that they were still unacquainted with the attributes of the death-dealing gun. Conspicuous among these birds was a species of land-rail, which was easily killed, and which was found to afford most excellent eating. They supped upon it, and enjoyed to the full the delightful feeling of contentment and rest which plenty brings to those who have suffered from a protracted spell of short commons, and Frank, as he sank to sleep, soothed by the evening song of the plaintive whip-poor-will, felt his whole being expand into a hearty feeling of gratitude to his Creator, who had so mercifully preserved him and relieved his necessities.

CHAPTER XI.

'WESTWARD HO!'

'The labour we delight in physics pain.'

O'BRIEN, in the journey which succeeded, showed that he possessed in a high degree that talent for acquiring a knowledge of locality which is beyond all things necessary to a backwoodsman and hunter. In these wild lands and pathless forests, to lose one's way is the most serious of misfortunes, and often results in a lingering death from starvation or the attacks of wild animals; but O'Brien found his way over these trackless prairies with the instinct of the Red Indian. A bent twig, a fallen leaf, a trail in the dense herbage, seemed to mark out in the trackless wilderness a path for him.

The country around them had become very beautiful, and was at times grandly picturesque. It no longer consisted of an expanse of rolling prairie, but was diversified by hills, fertile valleys, lakes, streams, and fine groves of stately trees. After travelling through this country for some time, they came to a broad and deep river.

'Here's a puzzler,' said Frank. 'How in the wide world are we to get across this stream?'

'Oh deary me!' said Pompey, 'de water so deep and so strong it soon drown we.'

'Let me see,' said O'Brien, 'there's no timber here, or we could have made a raft; but there's lots of willows. Pompey, look alive and gather me a large bundle of them—and you, friend Blake, cannot do better than help him.'

Pompey's white teeth glanced like ivory.

'Eh, Massa O'Brien, what you do wid de willows? Willows no swim, he! he! ho!'

'Who said they would, you obtuse blackamoor. Just wait

a bit, and you will see ; and in the meantime fetch me the willows.'

The willows were brought, and he then began with much ingenuity to weave a slender framework of green twigs, which he tied together with strips of buffalo skin. This he then covered in turn with buffalo skins sewed together, and tightly stretched over the willow framework. The seams were then well greased, and behold, a canoe five feet long and two feet broad, ready for launching, with O'Brien standing up in it for ferryman.

'Get in, gentlemen,' he said with a laugh ; 'first rate boat, and nothing to pay.'

'I would as soon, almost,' said Frank, 'adventure with Charon across the river Styx.'

'What are you at now, Blake, my dear fellow ? You are not seriously frightened, eh ?'

'No, but the sight of your craft is enough to bother one a little ; you had better get the baggage on board, I think, and show us a little of it's navigating power.'

'All right ; look alive, Pompey ;' and in a short time the baggage was transferred to the frail craft, and paddled safely across.

He then returned for Frank, who no longer hesitated, while Pompey loudly declared his intention to remain and take his chance with the horses.

The canoe then set off on its second voyage, so deeply weighted that it was sunk almost to the water's edge, while the same liquid element was oozing more freely than was pleasant through the pervious skin frame. So great was the leakage, and so rapidly did the water rise outside, that Pompey, on the opposite shore, got into a frenzy of fright.

'Top, Massa Frank !' he yelled ; 'top, dear Massa Frank, for de lub ob heaven ! No use dis ; de water is rising, de boat is going down. What come of your poor shild here, him left alone in de world ?'

'Never fear, Pompey, I will take care of you, my black hero.'

'No, no, no,' blubbered Pompey. 'Me not so sure of Massa O'Brien ; him nice man, berry nice man, now him get fat again wid de fowls and de porcupine meat ; him berry good-tempered now. Hungry and cold him not politeful to white gentleman—no, nor to black either.'

'That will do, Pompey,' cried his master ; 'I am safe, as you see, and now make haste and get yourself and the horses over.'

'Yis, massa, I be coming myshelf, and de oder quadrupeds wid me,' sung out Pompey.

He had attached the waggon by a rope made fast to one of the shafts to the tail of one of the horses, and he then drove all the animals into the water, and making a flying leap himself, landed in the waggon, the impetus of his weight sinking it at first under the water. It soon, however, regained its equilibrium, and the crossing went bravely forward. Imperceptibly, however, they were drifting a little down the river, which brought them thump against a small rocky islet covered with bushes. The force of this collision capsized the cart, and Massa Pompey was thrown out like a stone from a catapult, landing on his head with such force that his master cried out : 'I will lay my life on it, the poor fellow's skull is fractured.'

'Your's would have been,' said O'Brien, 'or mine, for that matter, but a negro's skull is as hard as flint—he won't be a hair the worse of it.'

He was right. Almost in a moment, Pompey gathered himself up, shook himself like a big dog, and immediately began to halloo for help with all his might.

'Now mind yourself, my black beauty,' sung out O'Brien, 'and be thankful that I am tolerably fat at present, and therefore in a good-humour. You see what this is?' holding up a long coil of rope. 'Well, then, look out,' and with the expertness of a practised hand with the lasso, he hove the noose of the rope at the negro, who stood gesticulating and chattering and grinning like a huge baboon.

In a moment it was round his neck, it slipped over his arms, and in a twinkling O'Brien had hauled it tight, and Pompey, yelling, kicking, backing, and clutching at the bushes frantically, first with one hand and then with the other, was hauled into the foaming flood, Frank and O'Brien hoisting and pulling away till, after a great deal of trouble, they succeeded in landing their prize high, but not dry, on the top of the bank.

'I declare, Pompey,' said O'Brien, 'I never thought you were so heavy; I am regularly black in the face with pulling you to land.'

'Massa, I about dead wid de cold,' pleaded poor Pompey, 'and noting for supper, massa, but one, two, tree rib ob deer.'

'This hint must make one of us take to gunning without delay,' observed O'Brien. 'Suppose I go, while you pitch the camp, friend Blake, and make as big a fire as you can, and warm your sable ally here. A negro cold is as useless as a broken reed.'

So saying, he took his gun, and soon returned with a plentiful supply of wood-partridges, which afforded them a comfortable supper.

In the morning, when about to leave, they encountered a party of trappers, and obtained from them a supply of flour, a commodity they much needed, and which afforded them the luxury of tasting bread once more. Their bread, albeit only unleavened cakes of damper, being voted absolutely delicious. They also procured coffee, sugar, and a few other necessaries. Towards evening of the next day they had their first view of the Rocky Mountains.

'It is a glorious prospect,' cried Frank. 'It quite exhilarates me to look at these ranges of pine-covered hills, after plodding as we have done through such stretches of level country. Look, far away, melting into the distance, they mount up against the sky, row upon row of rugged rocky peaks, with a range of snow-clad giants towering in the foreground. Why, man, have you no enthusiasm? Are you absolutely

devoid of any perceptions of the beautiful——? Do you not see how the snow in the rock hollows glitters in the bright sunlight, as if a whole casket of gigantic Koh-i-noors had been scattered abroad, while this soft blue haze softens the dazzling brilliancy of the scene, and seems to bring the mighty hills soaring in their strength close before us.'

'Bless my life, Blake, I had no idea you could be so poetical. I could not, to save my life; and yet my heart warms to the old hills, and the old camping-grounds, and the trappers' wild free life. As I live by food, here comes Pompey with another huge porcupine, whereon I may sup and grow fat, a process which the worthy fellow considers desirable in my case in more respects than one.'

A roaring fire, in readiness for Pompey, was blazing a few yards off, and very soon, under the deft hands of that *chef de cuisine*, the porcupine, stripped of its quills and skin, presented the appearance of a fat little white pig. This stage was soon passed, and anon a savoury stew was bubbling in the pot, and a variety of tit bits, poised each on a sharp stake, were roasting with a gentle frizzling sound, and sputtering out big goutts of fat, while Pompey, swarth and happy, hovered in the background like a guardian angel, only not of the traditional hue, loudly smacking his lips, uttering a succession of satisfactory grunts, and occasionally trying a small morsel. 'Let me see if it be well done, let me see. Eh, yes, Massa Pompey; dat will do, berry good, dat, fit for Massa Frank and Massa O'Brien a'most. Berry nice man, Massa O'Brien; grow fat wid dis fine porcupine flesh; den him do eberyting shivel—no say blackie to me, Pompey Jocaloo.'

Next morning they began to ascend, and about midday passed through a narrow gorge, cleft in the ridge of hills as suddenly and abruptly as if it had been cut with a knife.

'This,' said O'Brien, 'is called, by the chance Indians who wander hither, the Gate of the Hills, and within it lies a compact, lonely little world, of which you and I are going to take possession—at least for the winter.'

Following the narrow river valley, they travelled through thick timber, consisting of cedar and cotton-wood trees, stretches of swampy ground, and beautiful green meadows, bright with flowers, vetches, tiger-lilies, blue borage, red orchis, and marsh violets.

At noon, still following the picturesque willow-fringed stream, they arrived at a spot where it widened out into a broad creek. Clumps of cedars grew on the banks, and feathered the steep ridges, stretching upwards till their great branches seemed to touch the sky.

'What a lovely, picturesque, sequestered spot,' said Frank.

'I am glad you like it,' rejoined his friend, 'for this is Cedar Creek, and here we will pitch our camp for the winter.'

'You think,' said Frank, 'it offers us all the necessary requisites—game, beaver, an abundance of other fur-bearing animals, and tolerable security against wandering bands of Indians.'

'Yes, it offers us all these advantages. Game, even large game, is abundant; beaver delight in these willow-fringed streams, and there are abundance of other fur-bearing animals, such as silver foxes, marten, otter, mink and lynx, wolverine, ermine and musk rats.'

'With all these, or half of them, we should make up our pack, I think,' said Frank.

'Then for birds, which a trapper depends upon to keep the pot boiling fully as much as upon larger game, we have the wood partridge, the pine partridge, the prairie hen and the wild turkey.'

'And we have a fair provision now of flour, coffee, tea, sugar, salt, and such small items. Altogether, I think we have provided against almost every possible want and contingency.'

'What we require now is a house in which to store our property, and wherein to lodge our noble selves.'

'And the first thing,' said Frank, 'is to choose a site. I vote for that lovely little meadow beside the stream.'

'So do not I,' said O'Brien. 'Why, man, the first spring freshet will ensure us the fate of the house you were reading about the other night, that was founded upon the sand. No, no, we will sacrifice amenity to security; we will go further up the bank, and fix our abode beneath that clump of ancient cedar trees; their wide spreading branches will keep us snug and warm, and protect us from the wild winter storms.'

'All right,' said Frank, 'I bow to your experience as my preceptor in all trapping and prairie pursuits.'

CHAPTER XII.

CEDAR CREEK.

'The web of our life is of a mingled yarn,
Good and ill together.'

It having been agreed to build their house or lodge under the clump of cedars, the first thing to be done was to procure the materials. These consisted, in the first instance, of a lot of rough logs, with which a rude enclosure was formed, the logs, to keep them in their places, being morticed together at the corners. These logs which formed the walls were not close together—indeed, they were so open, that Frank jestingly proposed to call their new abode a castle in the air. 'For,' he said, 'we shall have, I think, a little too much of that commodity.'

'Now my beautiful darling,' said O'Brien, 'don't bother or perplex your small mind with things you know nothing about. Trust the architect, and you will see the building rise as stately and beautiful as Solomon's temple—or, at least, as like it as can be put up on the banks of Cedar Creek.'

'But Massa O'Brien, dere is no door, nor window eider. How we see? how we get in?'

'Is that you, blackie?' sung out O'Brien. 'If you don't be quiet, I shall build specially a terrible court of the Gentiles for you, where you will be so cold all winter that you won't be able even to blubber.'

'Massa not politeful,' pouted Pompey.

'It is you who are not politeful, Massa Pompey, criticising my beautiful work before it is well begun, to the manifest neglect of your own duties. What, I may ask, has your worshipful cookship provided for the pot to-day? You know I am a terrible fellow, if I am allowed to get lean.'

Pompey grinned, as much as to say 'that goes without telling,' and proceeded to count out upon his fingers: 'One, two, tree duck, and one, two prairie hens.'

'Very good,' proceeded O'Brien gravely, 'and as there are ducks for supper, I graciously forgive your indiscretion. A duck at this season is a tit-bit for an epicure. They are most delicious eating, they are as fat and delicate as any barn-yard quack-quacks, and they have all the superior flavour of the wild-bird.'

'Nebber see soch funny man,' muttered Pompey. 'When him speak of eating, and of de nice tings him put in him tomack, him talkee, talkee, talkee, all day.'

O'Brien, however, did something more than talk. In due time he proceeded, with Frank's assistance, to cut a window and a hole for the door in the walls of the log-shanty. Then a door was made of boards from the waggon, nailed together, and lastly, a roof was put on of straight poles, young straight pine-trees with the branches lopped off. This roof was then covered with a thatch of the long tough marsh grass, and loose earth was thrown on, and roughly plastered over with clay. The openings in the log walls were then filled up with clay, mixed with chopped grass, which gave to it almost the tenacity of mortar. The earth was then dug, and scraped out of the inside floor to the depth of three feet,

which O'Brien explained would not only add to the height of the walls internally, but would make it much warmer in winter.

'And now,' said Frank, 'what on earth are we to do with the window; glass, I suppose, is an unattainable luxury at Cedar Creek.'

'Granted,' said O'Brien; 'but you see what a blessing it is for you, my inexperienced child, to be associated with a man of ingenuity and resource. Here is a sheet of mica which was forced upon me last fall by a wandering Russian trader. I laid it past for the proverbial rainy day—egad it was about the only thing I did save, and lo! it comes out now as pat for the occasion as the shell is for the egg.'

'It's a little dim, don't you think?'

'You unmitigated grumbler, I have a good mind to pitch you over the Rocky Mountains, right back into civilized society again. A little dim! Och, murther! Only fancy the finest plate-glass out here, at Cedar Creek! What will your highness be wishing next—a couch of velvet and a service of gold-plate?'

'Get along with you, O'Brien, and don't laugh more than you can help—it's not good for you.'

'Faix, then, I won't, but if it's not asking too much of your worshipful lordship, perhaps you would go and get me a supply of fresh clay for building the chimney, and as the chimney is the most critical part of the whole concern, I hereby give notice that if any man, black or white, dare to speak to me while I am building the aforesaid chimney, I will not be answerable for the consequences. Now be off and bring me the clay.'

This precious commodity was rather scarce, and was not to be obtained except with considerable labour. To get it Frank had to dig down through several feet of earth, and then he came upon a bed of it which promised an unlimited supply. Meanwhile O'Brien had been busy constructing a framework of wood, and getting a lot of stones together. The wooden chimney was then well plastered with clay, and a capacious fire-place of stones built underneath.

Next day the mansion at Cedar Creek was floored. Then three bunks were put up and lined with grass in lieu of feather-beds or mattresses. Buffalo skins supplied the place of blankets, and they felt after their first trial of them, that they were comfortably and even luxuriously put up for the winter as far as sleeping accommodation was concerned. A table was then made, rough, but serviceable and strong. Along the walls of the hut several tiers of shelves were nailed up, and a set of chairs, somewhat after an antique and medieval fashion, were turned out with much anxious thought and labour.

'Now,' said O'Brien, 'I think we will do. The necessities of life, friend Blake, are few—its luxuries are many. Let us eschew them; all we want now is a safe for our meat.'

'Does not that seem to your severe mind to partake somewhat of the nature of a luxury, most excellent modern Diogenes?'

'Not at all, oh sweet simplicity! If we don't have a safe—that is, a raised platform erected on high posts—on which to place our meat, we shall have to feed not only ourselves, but all the wolves in the valley.'

'Let us have a safe, then, by all means,' responded Frank.

It was still only the beginning of September; the weather was gloriously bright and fine, and among the close thickets, which were beginning to assume their autumn garniture of crimson and gold, were to be found numerous berry-bearing shrubs, while the ground was covered with masses of bilberries which bore great quantities of large-sized fruit of a delicious flavour.

'It is a pity,' said Frank, 'that we cannot utilise these treasures in any way.'

'Why, man, we can,' said O'Brien. 'We shall have a manufacture of pemmican on a large scale—not the common vulgar pemmican which ordinary trappers use, but berry pemmican, which, let me tell you, is a really first-rate article of food, fit for the most fastidious gourmand.'

'Oh, ah !' moralised Pompey, 'him at de eating again. Him werry nice man, werry ; but berry funny—always tink-ing ob what him put in de mouth ob him.'

O'Brien took no notice of this interpellation, but continued calmly :

'We have plenty of time before us ; fur will not be in season until the beginning of November, for the animals do not get their winter coats till then, which puts me in mind that I must snatch a few moments to turn out a winter suit for myself ; but as the fruit won't wait, we must make the pemmican first, and to do so, we must have buffalo meat and fat, and plenty of it, too, for we will use only the best pieces.'

Buffalo, however, even in the most happy of hunting-grounds, do not always turn up when they are wanted. It was the twelfth of September before Pompey, who was out with his gun dodging a couple of prairie hens, thought he saw a small herd of buffalo quietly feeding in a distant hollow. He went at once in search of Massa Frank and Massa O'Brien, and breathlessly informed them that there were buffalo at a short distance off.

In haste each snatched a mouthful of food and prepared for the hunt.

'Now,' said O'Brien, savagely, for he had actually begun to cut his pantaloons when Pompey came in with his news, 'if that thick-skulled nigger of your's is wrong, Blake, I will pound his head into a jelly for him.'

'He is right,' said Blake ; 'yonder are our bovine friends.'

'Down, then, on our hands and knees,' rejoined O'Brien.

Frank obeyed, and they crawled through the long grass and tangled underwood, dodging first into one thicket and then into another, till Frank thought this sinuous serpent-like mode of progression was never to end. On they wriggled through one patch of scrub each denser than another, till at last O'Brien, who was in advance, paused about twenty yards from the buffalo bulls.

'I take the first shot,' he whispered, but as ill-luck would

have it, he missed ; and away, with tails in the air, went the whole herd at full speed, though, however, they did not run long. When a little more than a mile distant, they slackened their pace, and began to feed as they walked slowly along.

'There's nothing for it but trying again,' said Frank, and so they set out. When they were out of sight of the animals, they ran at full speed, and when there was no cover, they crawled on their hands and knees—wriggling along as near to the ground as possible, experiencing countless disappointments on their way. Often they would crawl a mile at a time, reaching by this painful and tedious mode of progression the place where the buffalo were last seen, only to find that they had left it, and were half a mile a head. At last they reached a little wooded hill, and enconscd themselves behind some bushes.

'Now,' whispered O'Brien, 'if our luck would but turn, and send them towards us.'

'Here they come,' rejoined Frank, in the same cautious tone.

'You take the first shot then, this time.'

Frank made no answer in words, but as soon as the fore-quarters of the leading buffalo, slowly appeared in view, he fired, and by the greatest of good-luck, the shaggy monarch of the prairie dropped down on his knees and fell over on his side—shot, as they afterwards ascertained, through the heart.

O'Brien also fired, almost at random, at the flying herd, as they scuttled away, and to his own surprise wounded one so seriously, that after running a few yards it stopped short, and uttering hoarse roars, fell down all of a heap among the long thick grass, where it shortly afterwards expired. Both these buffaloes were fine young bulls, with specially beautiful skins and long shaggy manes.

Setting to work with all possible despatch, they cut up the animals, and piled the meat ready for the pack-horses next day, and then found, somewhat to their amazement, that it was growing dark.

'What are we to do?' said Frank.

'Remain with the meat, of course,' rejoined O'Brien. 'It

has cost us too much labour to be abandoned to the hungry wolves.'

'But don't you think Pompey will lose his wits with fright, if we don't return to Cedar Creek?'

'I guess he will find them again before morning,' said O'Brien drily, setting to work with his hatchet to cut down wood for the fire.

Frank, seeing that nothing better was to be made of it, was fain to leave Pompey to his fate, which, at the worst, could only be a night of alarms, and seconded his efforts with such hearty good-will, that they soon had a roaring fire. They then cut off strips of meat and roasted them, and found them very juicy and good.

'The worst of it is,' said O'Brien, 'that when meat is eaten in this way, straight without any fixings, it needs a precious deal of it to satisfy a hungry fellow.'

'I should think it does,' said Frank drily; 'I declare my arms are aching with cutting off strips of meat for the roasting stakes.'

'That's one good of pemmican,' continued his friend, quietly appropriating another spit and its savoury burden. 'It is the most satisfying food in the world. I have seen me sit down to a plateful, which was simply nothing, as far as quantity was concerned—a mere sop to Cerberus—and yet I was obliged to leave some of it.'

'Which is more than I think we will do with the buffalo to-night, if we carry on at this rate,' rejoined Frank.

At last, however, even their voracity was satisfied. Fresh wood was piled on the fire, a soft elastic bed of pine twigs was spread for each, and they lay down to sleep, commending themselves to the protection of heaven. The scene around them was wild and grand in the extreme: the red light of the fire lit up the dark recesses of the cedar forest, and showed the stealthy forms of the prowling wolves, as they howled had snapped and growled around, distracted by the smell of the buffalo meat, and yet afraid to come near enough to make

a grab at it. To aid this savage chorus, a multitude of owls hooted and groaned; the whip-poor-will uttered from time to time its rapid startled cry, and the loon sent forth upon the still night air its long drawn melancholy scream.

Next morning O'Brien remained to guard the meat, and take his chance, as he said, of another bull, and Frank went home to bring the horses and a rough sledge which they had made of poplar stakes, on which to pack the meat.

Long, however, before he came in view of their log-built mansion, he heard a most extraordinary shouting and bawling—a regular hillabaloo, in fact—in which it was difficult to believe that Pompey, whatever might be the strength of his lungs, could be the sole performer. ‘What on earth can be wrong now?’ he thought, and setting off at full speed, he threaded the narrow windings of the forest path with the agility of a deer, and never stopped till he gained the shelter of an out-lying cotton-wood tree, behind whose ample bole he paused to reconnoitre the scene.

There stood the mansion of Cedar Creek, cozy and home-like in the dewy freshness of the morning, and there, right in front of it, absolutely pointing it like a couple of pointers, were the evident cause of Pompey's quandary, two grizzly bears, an old one and a young one. It was the first time he had seen this creature, the most formidable and dreaded denizen of the American prairies, and he was rapidly running his eye over it, taking a rapid glance of its grizzly beauties, when Bruin the elder, warned by her fine sense of smell that there was something interesting behind, as well as in front, wheeled sharply round, and he found himself face to face with an enormous brute, who growled horribly, and curling back her lips from her great teeth in an unpleasantly suggestive manner, advanced towards him.

He was unarmed, having left his trusty rifle in O'Brien's charge, an indiscretion of which he promised himself he should never again be guilty, and naturally his first instinctive impulse was flight. But a moment's reflection showed

him the utter inutility of such a course, and although quaking in every limb, he stood his ground bravely, and before the bear came close up to him, threw up his arms, and uttered an ear-splitting yell, which was echoed and re-echoed by Pompey from the shanty. The bear stopped, sat up on her hind legs, scratched one of her ears with her paw, as if in mute protest against the shrill concert with which she was greeted, and finally, with a puzzled look on her sagacious face, turned tail, and set off at full speed, followed by the young one, leaving Frank trembling in every limb with excitement, and even yet hardly realising his escape. His first efforts were directed to soothing as best he could his frenzied follower, whose distracting yells made the whole welkin ring.

On arriving close at the door, Pompey's round woolly head was cautiously protruded: his mouth was open, his eyes looked as if starting from their sockets, and rolled all round with a fixed, glassy, uncomprehending stare.

'Pompey, don't you know me?' said his master.

At the sound of the voice, he seemed for the first time to be aware of the presence of another human being, but to have lost for the moment all power of recognition, for he roared out in a fresh panic: 'Murder! murder! *de debil* come to me first like one big owl, den like two big bears, den like him own shelf!' and in the frenzy of his terror, he rushed past Frank, almost throwing him down, and took a header, involuntarily as it seemed, into the creek, head foremost, where he plunged about, walloping among the reeds and mud like a bundle of animated clouts, or a hippopotamus having a series of aquatic gambols.

'As I live,' said Frank, in some irritation, 'you almost deserve to drown, and yet I must waste time in pulling you out. Pompey, are you not ashamed of yourself? How can a man like you, who can handle a shooting-iron, as the Yankees say, so deftly, make such a fool of yourself? What was there in one or even two bears to put you into such a pucker?'

Whereupon Pompey explained, as his master suspected,



‘Although quaking in every limb, he stood his ground bravely.’
[Page 118.]

‘that it was not the bears at all, it was the Obeah!’ On first seeing the creatures he had not been at all frightened. He had taken a deliberate aim at the biggest, but to his dismay the cap only snapped. He then tried the other trigger, but it followed suit, missing fire also. He was surprised, but no whit dismayed; and while the foe growled outside, he sat quietly down, poured fresh powder into his gun, and recapped it, and saying to himself, ‘What will Massa O’Brien say when he see dis big bear,’ he took aim again, and again both barrels missed fire. A cold sweat broke out over him, he shuddered from head to foot, a whole troop of superstitious fancies thronged into his mind, and soon changed him from a reasonable and reasoning creature into little better than a frantic and helpless monomaniac.

CHAPTER XIII.

TRAPPING. ¹

‘Let your own discretion be your tutor.’

A SUFFICIENT quantity of buffalo meat having been procured, the next thing was to collect a quantity of wild fruit of all kinds, chiefly bilberries, and a species of service berry as large as a black currant, but shaped like a pear, very sweet and good.

The materials being then all to hand, the whole party set busily to work—Frank and Pompey, as novices, attentively observing O’Brien and obeying his commands. First the meat was cut into thin flakes and dried in the sun, these strips were then placed upon a dressed buffalo skin, and were assiduously pounded by Pompey with a rough pestle of wood,

till they were reduced to a state of powdery shreds. Then the marrow and soft fat of the buffaloes were melted down. The pounded meat, the berries, and a little sugar, were put into bags which had been prepared of buffalo hide, and the boiling grease was poured in, then the ingredients were all well mixed together and left to cool. It soon became solid, and was found to taste something like savoury mince-meat, and to be, as O'Brien had promised it should, 'splendid eating.'

The pemmican-making over, O'Brien once more took out his skins, and settled down to a contemplation of all that would require to be made good in his dilapidated wardrobe. He had even got the length of cutting a few inches, when he suddenly started up as if a more than usually lively mosquito had stung him, and exclaimed :

'As I live by bread, or rather damper, I had quite forgot that our supply of tea was running short. The fates, or rather the furies, I think, must have ordained that I shall henceforth wear a kilt, a dress most unsuitable to the climate.'

'You are fairly mad, O'Brien, I think,' said Frank. 'Do you know, I am beginning to suspect that your tailoring is all a delusion and sham? You seize upon every pretext for breaking it off. Granted that our tea is drawing to a close, you surely don't propose to replace it here?'

'I do, though, you ignoramus. You see that low shrub with narrow pointed leaves and white flowers that covers the boggy ground on the other side of the creek?'

'Yes, I do; but I decidedly object to any of your experiments, O'Brien.'

'Nonsense, man, that is the tea muskeg. It is quite equal to tea, or rather, it is much superior, when one has used it for a little while and got accustomed to the taste.'

'So-ho! it has a special taste then, has it?'

'Of course; I never heard of either a vegetable or plant that had not.'

'Granted ; but the taste of this tea muskeg, I will be bound, is something specially atrocious and vile.'

'That depends upon taste. To me it recalls the very earliest home picture I remember ; a cozy little room with my old nurse, Jessy Fisher, snoring at one corner of the fire, and an old black teapot softly bubbling at the other ; for to tell you the truth, this delightful beverage has a flavour of senna. It tastes exactly like black tea with a dash of senna in it, and you have no idea how the flavouring enhances the relish of it, and corrects, so to speak, the insipidity of the tea.'

'I thought as much. However, I suppose we ought to be thankful for even tea muskeg out in this wilderness, so I vote that we go at once and gather the whole lot of it.'

'Nay, that would be downright waste. What a blessing it is, my dear, that you have me to keep you right. We shall gather the proper quantity of it, neither more nor less, and after that I must really and truly shut myself up and stitch, stitch, stitch, from morn till dewy eve, and woe to the man or beast that interrupts me—I will show him or it no mercy. Yes, Pompey, you may well stare, you are about to find out at last what a terrible fellow I am.'

The tea muskeg gathered, O'Brien set to his tailoring in earnest ; he shut himself in, or rather out, for he retired to a little meadow behind the house, and was for a couple of weeks or more in a very irritable and anxious frame of mind. He spoke to no one ; and if any one spoke to him, he got a very short and snappish reply. At the end of that time, however, he re-appeared, bland and smiling, attired in a new suit of buckskin, with a capacious outer garment, which he called a capote. He had a bundle of something in his arms, from which, with much formality, he produced a couple of capotes, exactly similar to his own, one of which he bestowed upon Frank, while he threw the other to Pompey. With a 'There, massa nigger, put that on, and thank your stars that you have some one to look after you ; I suppose you think we have the climate of Cuba up here ? I can tell you our

north-easters will cut like a knife through that gay flannel shirt of yours.'

It was now getting much colder; the wind was keen, and the nights were cold, while the waters of the creek were often coated in the morning with a thin layer of ice, and O'Brien announced that he thought he would go out and prospect for beaver, and give a guess as to their general prospects as to peltries. Frank would have gone with him, but he preferred to be alone. He had acquired many of the tastes of the half-breed trappers who had hitherto been his only associates, and loved, like them, to wander alone for days through the intense solitude and stillness of the woods—a taste which seemed to Frank Blake altogether inexplicable, although he was by nature a much more silent man than the usually loquacious Irishman.

When he returned at night, he reported that he had found the woods behind the house very suitable for their purpose. There were many beaver dams on the stream, and in the solitudes of the forest little lonely lakes, on whose shores were abundant tracks of foxes, fishers, and mink.

'I think,' said Frank, after they had had a comfortable supper of stewed partridges, and were stretched out round the fire enjoying a smoke and a warm before turning into their bunks, 'I think, O'Brien, as you are our preceptor in woodcraft, you should give Pompey and me a general idea of the four-footed things which we are expected to circumvent and ensnare to their destruction.'

'My beautiful darling!' rejoined O'Brien, 'you may believe me when I tell you that they are far more likely to circumvent you. A beaver has the sense of you and blackie put together, and as for the wolverine, I need only say that it has managed more than once to take a rise even out of me.'

'Nonsense, you are joking. Only fancy: take a rise out of you!—I shall respect the whole race of wolverines in future for that; but, seriously, O'Brien, do spin us a yarn about the owners of the peltries, which I hope to see soon accumulating in our packs.'

‘Well, then, first of all there are Pompey’s friends, the bears. Their skins will bring us a couple or three pounds a-piece. Then there is the lynx, which does not cost much to trap, for it is taken in snares made of hide. Then there are the animals of the polecat tribe, whose furs bring a much higher price in proportion to their size. First, there is the marten, for which we will get from a pound to thirty shillings; then the fisher, which will bring us, for a fine large skin, as much as a couple of pounds; and lastly, the mink, which will bring us from fifteen shillings to a pound per skin. All these furs are classed as sable, although they vary both in quality and shades of colour. Otters are sometimes found, but they are not nearly so common, and are dearer in proportion, costing as much as a shilling per inch.’

‘And that, I suppose, is the whole lot of them?’

‘Not at all; I have kept the most valuable to mention last. The choicest and most expensive of all furs is the silver fox.’

‘What colour is it?’

‘A most beautiful blueish grey, the hairs tipped with black, with a sprinkling of altogether black hairs through them. When I have a lady love, if I ever am so foolish, I shall make a point of presenting her with the skin of a silver fox.’

‘How much may it cost?’

‘There spoke the Scot. Why, man, do you measure a gift of affection purely by its money worth?’

Frank protested that nothing was farther from his thoughts. ‘I merely asked,’ he said, ‘because you have told us the money value of each fur when you mentioned the animal to which it belonged.’

‘Well, what do you think of ninety or a hundred pounds a pair; I have got more, but a fool and his money—you know the rest of it.’

‘A very tolerable price, I think,’ said Frank, ‘and as for the proverb, Pompey and I will show you how to take care of your money in future. The silver-fox, is that the only variety of Reynard in these parts?’

'Oh, no, there are cross foxes, with a dark stripe down the back, and there are foxes of every possible tint you can imagine, between the common red, and the rather uncommon silver-fox. Beaver, which is common, is, I regret to say, not quite so valuable now as it used to be, owing to the absurd fancy people are taking to wear thin useless hats from Paris, instead of the old substantial beaver tile. The making of silk hats ought, I think, to be put down by law—don't you agree with me?'

'Well, if——'

'I hate ifs and buts, and the slow caution that is afraid to commit itself even in words. I am afraid you will never, do what I will, develop into a good trapper.'

'I am not sure of that; for a trapper patience and its usual concomitant, caution, are, I should think, qualities not to be sneezed at; but having learned what the animals are, I would like to know next how they are caught?'

'In the first place, you must keep your eyes open—you have no books here to help you, except the great book of nature, but if you study it attentively, it is worth all the books on natural history put together. You must learn to distinguish the track of one animal from another, and you must make yourself master, as far as possible, of all their habits and peculiarities, and then you must learn to make and set traps.'

'I have eight beaver traps with me.'

'Well, that is as many as one trapper can manage, and the other traps are easily made. To-morrow you shall come with me to a place where I noticed a great many tracks of the beaver and marten, and I will initiate you into the mysteries of trap making.'

'Very good,' said Frank, 'I hope you will find me an apt pupil.'

'Faix, then, my darling,' said O'Brien, with one of his quizzical looks, 'I have no such expectation, but I will do my duty by you.'

The following morning they set out on their first trapping expedition. The weather was now cold, and the ground was covered with a powdering of snow, on which the foot prints of many different animals were distinctly visible. These O'Brien examined with great care, as they went along, and pointed out to his companion the respective differences between each.

'How beautiful these forests are,' said Frank, 'I can conceive nothing more grand than these stately cedars and pines. Some of them must be between two and three hundred feet high, at the very least, and how exquisitely they are wreathed and feathered with snow. The intense solitude and stillness, too, adds, I think, to the effect. We have not seen a single living-creature, or heard anything louder than the cheep of a squirrel, since we came out.'

'Poo! poo!' said O'Brien, 'very untrapper-like, all this. You will oblige me, friend Blake, by keeping your eyes on the ground, and reserving your poetic rapture for a more fitting season.'

Thus rebuked, Frank plodded on in silence until they came to the portage between two small lakes; here O'Brien stopped, unslung his pack from his back, and told his companion to do the same.

'You see these tracks upon the ground?' he said, pointing to numerous footprints of animals which dotted the snow, 'I have pointed out some tracks similar to these as we came along—now tell me what these are?'

Frank considered for a moment, and then said, boldly:

'These are tracks of the marten, are they not, and this of the fisher?'

O'Brien surveyed him with a quizzical glance of surprise. 'Absolutely, I begin to doubt if you are quite so obtuse as I thought you. With care, I think you may do yet. Yes, it was a lucky guess; these are the tracks of the marten and fisher, and what we have got to do now, is to make a dead fall, a wooden trap, in which to catch them.'

‘All right,’ said Frank. ‘How do we proceed?’

‘First of all we cut down a number of these saplings, then we divide them into stakes about a yard long, and then we make a fence with them, somewhat in the shape of an egg cut through the middle.’

‘And what next?’

‘We leave a narrow aperture, which will admit only about two thirds of the long slender body of our furry friends, but which must be decidedly too narrow to admit of their entering and turning themselves round. Across this entrance we lay a short log.’

‘There, that is done. What is the next stage?’

‘We must fell a tree of considerable size—that one, I think, will do—then we must strip its branches off, and lastly, we must poise it so that it shall rest upon this short log at the door in a parallel direction. Now have you the bait ready?’

‘Yes, here it is—a piece of a squirrel Pompey shot for this very purpose.’

‘Very good; now we must impale this piece of flesh upon a short stick like this, then we must project this short stick horizontally into the enclosure, and make the end of it rest upon another short stick, which I place, you will observe, perpendicularly, and this supports the large tree laid across the door.

‘And is that the whole of this ingenious machine?’

‘Not quite; we must cover in the top carefully with bark and branches, so that Monsieur and Madame Marten, when they do us the honour to pay us a visit, shall be able to find no access to the bait except the opening which we have left between the propped-up tree and the short log beneath. Compelled to enter in that way, he no sooner seizes the tempting morsel, than squash-down falls the log, and he is crushed to death.’

‘Poor wretch!’

‘Nay, I expected you to moralise upon the dreadful results

which usually attend upon impertinent curiosity, and I was just going to trip you up with a reminder that we have really no time for homilies or anything else except trap-making. How many of these traps do you suppose we shall have to set to-day ?

‘A dozen, perhaps.’

‘A dozen ! Mother of Moses, heard ever a mortal man the like of that. Faix, honey, you’ll live and learn ; we have just a trifle of forty or fifty of these same to make and set this blessed day—so look alive. Sharp is the word in every sense.’

‘So be it,’ said Frank, meekly. ‘The more work the better ; it never comes amiss to me.’

‘Right !—that’s the way to get on. Then, when we have our tale of these completed, I have a few steel traps in my blanket. Here they are.’

‘They are much like ordinary rat-traps, I think,’ said Frank.

‘Yes, they are, but with a difference. An ordinary rat-trap has teeth, these have none ; but the springs, you perceive, are double.’

‘I see ; and they look very strong.’

‘They are tolerably tough ; and as we go home we shall set a few of them in the snow and cover them carefully up, then we must scatter a few morsels of meat all round, and then carefully smooth the snow over with this bunch of willow twigs, so as to leave no trace of our footsteps.’

‘And is that all ?’

‘By no means ; we must fix the trap. It has, as you see, a chain attached to it, terminating in a ring, and to make it fast we must drive a stake into the ground, and slip the ring over the stake.’

‘And the stake, I suppose, must be driven very firmly into the ground ?’

‘That is not absolutely necessary ; whatever animal is caught in it will be caught by the leg, and he will tear and

lunge at the chain until he gets the stake up, however far it is driven into the ground.'

'And the trapped animal gets off, does it?'

'There again now,' said O'Brien, with a touch of not infrequent irritability. 'You do make most pestilent suppositions. Did I say the trapped animal got off? I said it pulled up the stake, and I was just going to tell you what it did with it, but upon second thoughts I won't.'

'I beg a thousand pardons, so pray go on, man—I am all attention.'

'It's more than you deserve, but from a sense of duty I will tell you. Well, where was I? Ah, at the stake; he pulls it up and rushes off, carrying the trap with him, and then the stake, dragging behind, gets entangled across the trunk of a tree or around some fallen timber, and the fugitive is brought suddenly up, and has to wait till we come to him when we are making our rounds on the following morning.'

At last all the traps were set, and they wended their weary way homewards.

'What a comfort it is,' said O'Brien, 'that we have that black fellow of your's, Blake, to keep the house, and cook, and fill the larder for us. He can manage a shooting-iron in first-rate style, too. When he has not one of his absurd panics upon him, he is what I call a plumb centre shot.'

'I wonder what he will have for us to-night?' said Frank. 'I feel so hungry, that I could eat almost anything. I ought to be ashamed of myself, I suppose, but I frankly confess that a rest and a warm fire and a good supper seem to me at present the acme of human happiness.'

'In a short time, my dear boy, you shall have all three. Why, bless me!' quoth the gastronome of the wilderness, warming with his theme, 'that man of your's is a treasure. He likes a good meal himself. What sensible fellow does not? and he spares no trouble; he takes a real pride in his art, and now that I have shown him where to find certain herbs useful, indeed priceless, in their way as seasonings, his

stews and ragouts leave nothing to be desired. Eh, Pompey, what now? I hope you have got something for us to eat; something nice and hot, and plenty of it, for we are as nearly famished as possible.'

'Yes, massa,' grinned Pompey. 'We hab nice supper to-night; we hab fish broiled, dat I catch in de creek, and pancake that I fry nice and hot, and antelope that I shoot, nice and fat. Massa hear him frizzling wid de heat ob de fire; him beautiful—crisp and brown. Massa feel de smell ob him?'

'That I do,' cried O'Brien, his whole face brightening. 'Pompey, you are—you are—a gentleman, and as such I respect you.'

'Ah, massa!' said Pompey, grinning and showing his white teeth, 'me know dat you soon find out dat Pompey not one useless black fellow, but one Christian gentleman like massa. Now me desirable to serve massa, like my own Massa Frank.'

'How did you shoot the antelope?' said Frank. 'I had an idea that they were exceptionally swift creatures.'

'So dem is. Nero, he try to catch dem often—always miss—dat no good at all. So I say to de dog, "Nero, you one dog ob sense; here, good dog, listen to me one leetle word: you stay at home and keep de house dis one time"—if I had said dis time, him no do it; but I said dis one time, and he go and lie down, and pretend him was asleep.'

'And you don't mean to say you outran the antelope yourself, Pompey?'

'Massa, no; you hab no patience. You no know, massa, but Massa O'Brien know dat de antelope one very foolish person, always want to poke him nose into eberyting, so when I saw dat dere was a whole flock ob dem, I shut Nero in, in case him change him mind, and I creep leeward ob de herd on my hands and tomack, and I take dat old red shirt ob mine, and put him on de stick, and wave him gently—gently—den one leave de oders feeding, and come slowly up,

nibbling at de grass as him come, but always looking at de red shirt, and before him come near enough to poke him nose in it, he come widin the range ob dis gun, and dis shild shoot him, cut him up, keep dis roast for to-night, and put de rest on de safe.'

'Pompey, you are a trump; and I for one will never forget my debt of gratitude to you. The smell of the antelope roast is delicious; let us fall to without delay. Blake, you are chaplain.'

'I had no idea,' said Frank, cutting for himself a huge slice off the roast, 'that antelopes were found in America.'

'Had you not? Your education seems to have been woefully neglected in many respects. A little knowledge of natural history would have stood you in good stead now. At least, it would have prevented you asking a whole lot of tiresome questions, and this peculiarly absurd query in particular, for then you would have known that a variety of the antelope (yclept *Antilocapra*) is extremely abundant in these parts, although in the depth of winter they generally migrate southward.

CHAPTER XIV.

A TRAPPER'S ROUNDS.

'Sport royal, I warrant you.'

NEXT morning they again set out to make a round of the forest, and visit their traps, but each went in regular trapper-fashion, alone; and to Frank's surprise, he did not find it in the least irksome. He was continually engaged in looking out for, and examining carefully the numerous tracks of different animals which he passed as he trudged along. Each

one had a different story for him ; each contained a separate page of natural history, which he soon learned to read. In a very short time he knew as much about the habits of each several animal as O'Brien himself did, and could make a trap and set it almost as quickly and skilfully. In his share of the round, he found that he had trapped a considerable quantity of mink. This little creature, which is web-footed and partially aquatic in its habits, has a weasel-like face and sharp round eyes ; its skin, which is beautifully fine and thick, is of a rich brown colour. He also had one or two martens, a good many fishers, and, greatest prize of all, a couple of silver foxes.

About half way, on the edge of a small frozen lake, he met O'Brien, and they sat down on the trunk of a fallen tree and made a hearty meal upon some pemmican they had brought with them. They had with them also a tin kettle and cup, and a couple of unleavened cakes, which Pompey sometimes called pancakes and sometimes gallette. Gathering a few dead pine branches, they soon had a roaring fire, and a jolly brew of warm tea ; and as O'Brien's share of the trapping round had also been unusually productive, they were as nearly as possible in the seventh heaven of contentment.

'What in the wide world are these ?' said Frank, pointing to a collection of conical bundles of reeds which dotted the surface of the frozen lake, like so many gigantic bees' hives.

'These are the houses of the musk-rate. They have just newly finished building them. They begin the work as soon as the lakes are frozen over, and very comfortable family residences they are, let me tell you.'

'I have no doubt of it.'

'Inside they are lined with moss, and a variety of soft withered grasses, so that the little occupants may not feel the pinching cold, and they contain, moreover, a sufficient store of aquatic plants to sustain the animals until spring returns. They have a hole by which they communicate with the lake, so that each little colony of musk-rats may enjoy their daily

bath and swim, to do which with the greater comfort they have, as you see, cut a great many breathing holes all over the ice. These they cover also with little mounds of cut reeds to keep them open.'

'So these smaller hillocks, like mole hills, are their work also.'

'Yes, they are, and as long as the frost holds, the musk-rat's home is his castle, perfectly impregnable; but in spring, when the sun's rays are strong and warm, the frozen walls soften, and then the poor creature has a variety of enemies to encounter, such as the fox and mink.'

'What an interesting little animal!—it is larger, I suppose, than the rats with which I am familiar.'

'My dear fellow, it is not a rat at all—it is rather a diminutive beaver. It is about half the size of an ordinary cat, and is lighter in colour than the common brown rat. In all other respects it is like a beaver, and has the beaver's flat tail, only the beaver's tail is flat horizontally, and the musk-rat's is the other way—you understand?'

'Flat perpendicularly, you mean.'

'Precisely, and there is another difference too; the beaver is exclusively a vegetable feeder, whereas the musk-rat has no objections to vary his usual vegetable diet with the eggs of aquatic birds, and fresh-water mussels when they can be procured.'

'And is the pelt of these animals entirely valueless?'

'By no means; their fur is eagerly sought after, only we are so rich in furs, for the time being, that at present it is no object to us.'

Next morning Frank set out alone to set his traps, O'Brien going in a different direction. This day they were not to meet. From morning to night he was to be altogether upon his own hook, and when he trudged off after breakfast with his gun on his shoulder, his pack slung on his back, and his axe, tin-kettle and cup suspended at his belt, he felt, to tell the truth, a little lonely; but this only lasted until he got well

into the forest—then all was intense, fascinating interest. Here, lightly impressed upon the snow, were the delicate airy footprints of the fleet silver-fox—there the active mink had trotted quickly along; this was the marten's stealthy trail—that the deeper track of the slower, heavier fisher.

Towards the afternoon he began to feel a little tired; his pack was heavy, so were his clothes, and the track was so cumbered with underwood and fallen timber that he had often considerable difficulty in finding it. He had, moreover, set more than half of his traps, and was anxiously looking out for a pretty little lake described to him by O'Brien, and just beginning to fancy he had somehow lost his way, when, emerging from a very thick belt of pines, he came suddenly upon it. O'Brien had called it small, but it was larger than any of the lakelets he had yet seen, and was studded with islands covered with trees and underwood, while across its ice-bound surface a glimpse was obtained of the distant hills, whose rocky snow-clad peaks, seen half in sunshine, half in shadow, glowed with the warmest tints of amber, which deepened into purple and red and slowly faded into dull leaden grey.

Sitting down beneath a gigantic birch-tree, hoary with snow, and venerable with long tufts of hairy-like lichen, he disencumbered himself of his load, gathered wood, made his fire, cooked his pemmican, made his tea, and then, having had a refreshing meal, he gave himself up to a short contemplation of the charming scene, after which his thoughts, as they always did when he was alone, wandered away across the Atlantic to the old ivy-covered house of Ballingray and his gentle patient mother. Once more he heard her farewell words of blessing, once more he felt her soft caressing touch on his shoulder, and his whole soul seemed to melt into yearning responsive tenderness, when crash, grunt, growl—an ominous and terrific roar made him spring up in a moment.

'Heaven and earth! what is that?'

Only a little woodland music, and there sits the performer

—a gaunt, huge grey mountain wolf, who surveys him leisurely with fierce eyes which glare venomously with a mingled expression of famished longing and fury. For a moment he was utterly scared ; he had all the sensations which a poor timid hare probably experiences when within an inch of the greyhound's open jaws. The next moment he recovered his fortitude, and gun in hand awaited his assailant's onset. Snarling like a dog, and curling up his nose so as to show his murderous fangs, Master Wolf took the initiative, and drew on, but not quickly, while Frank, firmly standing his ground, pointed the gun for his heart. Steadily he approached, growling as he came, when crash, bang went the one barrel, and still the wolf came on. It was an awful moment ; a thought flashed like lightning across the brain of the doomed man ; perhaps his mother at that very moment was praying for him. His self-possession returned ; quick as the thought that had nerved him, the other barrel was put in, and this time the huge brute stopped short, and with a stifled growl went crash over into a clump of hemlock. Stepping back a few paces, he proceeded to reload, but he was nervous and excited, and the bullet would not go down. The more he fumbled with it the more obstinate became the stick, the more awful the crisis, for the wolf, only temporarily stunned, had got upon his legs again, and was to all appearance in as good fighting trim as ever. Instinctively he seemed to comprehend the situation, and made a spring ; Frank dealt him a second blow with the butt end of the gun which staggered him for a moment, but the next he in his turn received a blow which sent the piece flying out of his hands. For a moment he gave himself up for lost, and then, blessed thought ! he remembered his revolver, and drew it out with his right hand. The wolf was now close upon him ; he saw the baleful green glare of its eyes ; he felt its hot breath, and like a man who had not a moment to lose, quickly fired two shots in succession down its open throat. The great jaws snapped over the dose of cold lead, the light faded out of its green eyes, it heeled over,

quivered from snout to tail, struggled convulsively for a minute or two, and then settled down stark and stiff. Frank sat down too, trembling and excited, and quivering all over like an aspen leaf. He had had a most narrow escape, and his whole soul went out in gratitude to the great God in whose Almighty hand he was, and who had so mercifully interposed to preserve him. He had still a number of traps to set, and before he got home it was so dark that it was scarcely possible to see objects distinctly. The trail was, however, so well marked that he was in no danger of losing it, but with his late terrible encounter in his mind, the rustle of every twig as he walked through the forest, and the creaking of the branches in the rising wind, seemed to him to herald the approach of some nocturnal enemy. He was thankful when he reached home in safety; O'Brien, already at rest from his labours, was tranquilly smoking a pipe of pleasant expectation as he superintended the preparations for supper, which were being actively conducted by the busy Pompey. It was a cheerful scene, full of peace and contentment, and when he burst upon it with his strung-up nerves still tingling with intense excitement, it was some time before he could explain the cause of his emotion, and even then he could only get out: 'I have killed a wolf!'

'Hillo!' quoth O'Brien; 'have you really now, and pray what took you out of the plain path of your duty to go bothering after these fellows of prairie banditti? I thought you would have had fully enough to do with the traps, my bully boy!'

'This fellow came after me—I had no choice but to fight; and if I should live to be a hundred years old, I shall never again have such a close shave for life, O'Brien, that's all. By Jove! I hear his howl yet; exactly like that of a foiled bloodhound, and I see his great fangs not two inches off my face.'

'Faix!' ejaculated O'Brien; 'if it was a grey mountain wolf, you have had a tough customer to deal with. They

are regular fiends—four-footed demons—to whom the coyote and prairie wolves are no more to be compared than a Cuban bloodhound is to a toy-terrier. I don't wonder you are a thought flustered—sit down and have a smoke; there's nothing like that for composing a man, and let your thoughts gently, and without effort, float away to these glorious ducks—so crisp, so brown, so beautifully roasted by our inimitable Pompey. Ah! what am I, that I should have been spared once more to eat canvas-back ducks in perfection? for of all the good feeds I ever had, they are the best,' and with that the epicure relapsed into silent contemplation of the ducks, gently swaying himself backwards and forwards, and occasionally indulging in a subdued inward chuckle, which, as the moment of dishing up approached, broke out into what was almost an anxious wail. 'Softly, Pompey, softly; this is no mere mess of yams and salt pork. Canvas-back ducks, my table hero, roasted as these are, cannot be treated with too much respect. Eh? Ah!—there you have it! Come, friend Blake, sweet is pleasure after pain. Zounds, man! here's a supper for you; fall to and enjoy yourself, and for your sake, I drink, in this foaming beaker of tea, confusion to all the wolves in the world, and may they be scattered to the north, south, east and west before so much as a mother's son of them opens its mouth even to howl at you again, my beautiful child. Pompey, my feelings overpower me—the kettle, my darling, the kettle!'

'Why, you are holding it yourself,' said Frank; 'and here have I been waiting for the last half-hour for a chance to smuggle it out of your paw, to get a mouthful of tea as long as it is hot.'

'I suppose you will say next that I have devoured the lion's share of the ducks, while my only solicitude was to see you eat—egad! but it is an ungrateful world, this. And now, before we tumble like cherubs into our sweet repose, I have a suggestion to make. Hitherto the horses have been picketed, and we have had no little bother and trouble

providing them with food. What I have to propose now is, that they be turned loose to shift for themselves.'

'But, my dear fellow, consider; they are good horses, and we shall never see so much as a hair of them again.'

'Zounds, Frank Blake! as I am a gentleman, you are the most contumacious and argumentative fellow I ever met with; of your ignorance, I say nothing. I have seen this done scores of times—over and over again.'

'I don't doubt that, but what was the result?'

'The result will be simply this: At the commencement of winter the horses are turned adrift, a sorry looking troop as can well be seen, fitter for the knacker's yard than anything else. Sometimes during the winter we may chance to see them in some sheltered valley—sometimes we may not. If from time to time we come across their tracks, that ought to content us. In spring, when we want them, all we have to do is to follow up their trail, and drive them home.'

'Perfect skeletons, I suppose?'

'I beg your pardon, not at all; as fat as balls, and as full of spirit and fire as if they had been fed on the best corn.'

'Well, man, what do they eat, that is the query? You don't mean to tell me, I suppose, that they go ravening all round like wolves, or feed on canvas-back ducks, like our noble selves.'

'No, I don't; canvas-back ducks, as you ought to know by this time, Master Frank, are food for the gods. What I do mean to say is this: that, like industrious creatures as they are, they are not above working for their living: they scratch and scrape away the snow from the grass with their forefeet; they eat and are filled; and as the pasture in these parts, even in winter, is inconceivably nutritious, and as they find plenty of wood to shelter them from the piercing wind, they thrive and become fat.'

'Well, I suppose you had best have your own way.'

'Perhaps I had, as I mean to take it; and now let me see—it is cold enough, I think, by this time.'

'I should say so, in all conscience. It is so cold to-day that I don't think it can by any possibility become much colder.'

'Hurrah then, my boy, for the beaver's paradise to-morrow! And now, messmates and allies, good-night both, for I am awfully tired and sleepy.'

CHAPTER XV.

BEAVER PARADISE.

'While the day serves, before black-cornered night,
Seek what thou want'st by freely offered light.'

THE spot which O'Brien designated as the beaver's paradise was at some distance off in the woods, and thither, loaded with beaver traps, they bent their steps next morning. The way was long, it was also rough, the beaver traps were heavy, and one at least of the party was pretty well foot-tired, when the welcome murmuring sound of rapid running water was heard above the rustle and sighing of the forest. Having reached a little stream, their labours were not, however, over, for they followed it in patient silence for more than a mile. At first narrow and rapid, it gradually became wider, and the banks lost their bold and precipitous character. At length the ground grew so swampy that they could no longer keep close to the margin of the stream, but were obliged to make a considerable detour, threading their way as best they could through thickets of cedar and clumps of hemlock, which gradually became more and more sparse, until they ceased altogether, and were succeeded by dense groves of willow.

'Look,' said O'Brien, pointing to some willow trees that had lost portions of the bark, and branches that had been

gnawed short off. 'Look, here are the evidences of our friend—his very sign manual.'

'It is repeated so often,' said Frank, 'that one would think a whole army of beavers had just migrated into this willow Goshen, and been having a regular gorge after a long fast.'

'What we have to do,' rejoined O'Brien, 'is to insinuate ourselves as quietly as possible between these willows, so as to reach with the least noise in the world the water's edge; but first we shall have a snack of pemmican to take off the keen edge of appetite, and while we are eating I will instruct you, as in duty-bound, upon the habits of the beaver.'

'I am all attention.'

'Well, then, beaver dams, whatever you may hear some wiseacres say to the contrary, are always built upwards from the bed of the stream, and are often thrown across rapid water courses such as this.'

'And is their height always the same?'

'No, it varies with the rapidity of the stream. In mountain streams such as this, about eight feet is the average height.'

'The edge of the dam, I suppose, is wood?'

'Yes, it is invariably the smooth trunk of some tree that grows on the bank of the stream. It is felled so as to fall across the stream, and no water is allowed to pass under it.'

'How do they manage that?'

'Why, very much as you would try to manage it, if you had such a dam to make. In the first place they caulk it tightly with small twigs, and then they plaster it well with mud-mortar.'

'But how on earth do they manage to fell a tree of just the proper size?'

'Aye! how on earth do they manage that? I frankly confess I cannot tell you. There are many things in this wild world around us that pass my philosophy to account for; but it is a fact that instead of bungling the matter as you and I would almost infallibly do, the beaver has such a

nice means of estimating the height of a tree which he is unable to climb, that he rarely or never cuts down one either too small or too large for his purpose.'

'That is very surprising.'

'Yes, it is, and it will astonish you still more to hear that, although comparatively small creatures, they sometimes cut down trees from thirty to forty feet high.'

'And how in the wide world do they contrive to make or lay on the mortar?'

'Why, with their tails, to be sure. A beaver's tail is a natural flexible trowel. With it he first puddles the earth on the banks of a stream into thick adhesive mortar; then, using the same invaluable appendage as a hod, he carries successive loads of this mortar to the place where he requires it, and then, still with the same useful weapon, which now does duty as a trowel, he spreads and plasters on his clay mortar just like a mason.'

'A beaver dam must require great patience, foresight, and labour.'

'Yes, it does, and it requires also the combined and long continued industry of many animals.'

'And what is its object, for they do not seem to live on it?'

'They live near it. The beaver house is always on the banks of the pool formed by the dam. The entrance to these beaver houses is about a foot under the water, and is a round hole in the bank of the stream.'

'Not a large hole, I suppose, just what will admit the animal easily?'

'It is generally from nine to ten inches across, and runs back into the bank from four to ten feet, according to the nature of the soil and other circumstances. It terminates in a circular basin four feet across, and as many deep, and it has a vaulted roof a foot or so above the level at which the water stands. This is the beaver's winter bath-room.'

'The little sybarite!'

‘Well, yes. In their way they are luxurious, and one of their principal luxuries is water; they must always have it, and the depth of this bath-room below the surface of the ground, and its distance back from the bank, ensures that the water in it will always remain unfrozen.’

‘And does the bath-room comprise the whole house?’

‘Oh, by no means; radiating from this vaulted chamber and sloping upwards are passages leading to the dwelling, breeding, and store-rooms of the family.’

‘And do many beavers inhabit these beaver mansions?’

‘Only one pair; the old couple drive out their two pairs of young ones whenever they are able to provide for themselves.’

‘Turn them destitute upon the world? Hard-hearted wretches!’

‘Indeed you wrong Monsieur and Madame Beaver—they have more conscience than that; they assist the young people to build a dam, and so set them respectably up in the world for themselves.’

‘And what do they live on during the winter? I suppose, like their cousins the musk rats, they lay up a supply of provisions?’

‘Yes; in autumn they accumulate a great store of small osier twigs, the inner bark of the cotton-wood trees, swamp maples, alders and willows. This food they pile up neatly in their store-houses, and as they are protected from frost and kept in a damp place, the twigs keep fresh and tender until spring. Now let us crawl as quietly as we can through the willows, and reconnoitre—slowly, softly. Don’t let a leaf rustle. There——’

Silently Frank surveyed the scene. An expanse of gliding water, shut in at the farther end by a dense growth of willows. In the foreground a couple of ancient beavers, sedate, meditative, with a serious engrossed manner, as if they were engaged in discussing some subject of vital importance to the community, sat upon the bank; and in the water, splashing and

diving and chasing each other in the most frolicsome manner possible, were a dozen or so of youngsters.

'Now,' said O'Brien, in a stealthy whisper, 'let us go;' and they crawled back. 'Plenty of them, you see,' he said, when they were out of earshot; 'but we cannot be too cautious. Where are the traps?'

'Here they are, and formidable-looking things they are too.'

'Yes, they are made on the principle of an ordinary gin, but with two springs, which are, and indeed must be, of the best steel. Their jaws are six inches across and three feet high, and to each trap there are twelve feet of chain and a strong piece of twine; that, I think, is all about them, except that we cannot set them to-day.'

'Oh, murder!' ejaculated Frank. 'Fancy that, and we are seven or eight miles from Cedar Creek, and my back is well nigh broken as it is.'

'You grumbling unreasonable wretch! Did I say that you were to carry the traps back? Hold your tongue, my beautiful darling, and show a little confidence in me, and just hitch up the lot, will you, into the cleft of that forked cedar; they will be there all right when we want them to-morrow.'

'Well, if you like to risk it; but the responsibility is yours, not mine, remember that.'

'Pah! botheration, I never take any responsibility; I hate the word. Hitch up the traps and have done with it.'

'Here goes then; and now I suppose we shall make tracks for Cedar Creek as fast as we can?'

'Let me see. We may as well look up the traps we set yesterday on our way home; no rest for the trapper, eh, Master Frank? be he good or bad.'

'As for the work,' said Frank, 'I don't complain of it, so I shall set out at once, as I want to secure the wolf's skin;' and he set off at a swinging pace.

'Blake! Blake! my dear boy,' shouted O'Brien, 'can you give me an idea of what Pompey is going to have for supper to-night?'

'No, I can't. Stewed Indian corn, I think, by way of change. We have been living too exclusively on a flesh diet of late.'

'Ah, Frank dear! No; mother of Moses, it would be too terrible! You're joking, ain't you now?'

'Did you not quote somebody or other to me only yesterday—some stupid blockhead who said it required a surgical operation to get a joke into a Scotchman's head?—and so as the wolf did not succeed in laying my skull open, how can I be joking? Seriously, O'Brien, your soul cleaves much too exclusively to these flesh pots of Pompey's.'

'Bah! my dear, be thankful that you are superior to all these weaknesses, and above all don't lecture, for if you do, I shall make a point of having a mess of Indian corn prepared for you every day. For myself, I am of a different temperament; my inward man requires to be sustained with canvas-back ducks, or any other little delicacy which that indefatigable Pompey can manage to procure. Priceless creature! He is worth his weight in gold.'

Pompey had, as usual, when they got home cold and tired, a roaring fire and a capital meal prepared for them, a sumptuous one even, for in addition to a first class roast of antelope, juicy and tender, he had a splendid grill of salmon trout, which he had caught himself in the creek.

'Pompey,' said O'Brien, 'my little blackamore, you are a trump, you are a hero—I admire, I honour, I love you! Ah, my sable darling, a glorious time is in store for you—Frank!' A voluminous puff of tobacco smoke. 'Frank Blake, my friend, did you ever taste beaver?'

'You will ask next, I suppose, did I ever taste frog?'

'My dear fellow, I never ask what I know. Ah, and so you never tasted beaver, eh?'

'No, I never did.'

'Then a new pleasure is in store for you; for beaver meat is very nice indeed. It is particularly delicate when served up as a stew—so succulent, I declare the very

thought of it makes my mouth water, and makes you grin, Pompey.'

'Eh, massa! Me grin because Pompey hear werry funny ting. Oh, oh! massa always tinkin ob what him eat, always!'

'Not always, Pompey,' gravely interjected O'Brien, 'for I am going to think just now of what I must wear. I and that simple innocent Massa Frank to-morrow. I suppose, friend Blake, you have not two ideas as to how a beaver trap should be set, or wherewithal you should be clothed when you attempt such a thing?'

'We shall wear our ordinary clothes, I suppose, shall we not?'

'And spoil them utterly. Oh, my dear, dear, dear ignoramus, my feelings overpower me! When shall I be able to give you the most primary rudiments of common sense and economy? No; we must rig ourselves out, as far as possible in woollen. For why, woollen dries again when it is wet, without shrinking or hardening, which buckskin, prairie tanned at least, does not. We must furbish up from the depths of our wardrobes a couple of woollen shirts apiece, pantaloons ditto, same of socks, our ordinary boots, and hats also, and a belt round each of our slender waists. In this we must stick a long handled tomahawk, a sheath knife, and a medicine bottle.'

'A medicine bottle. Good gracious, O'Brien, and what is that for? And what kind of medicine do you mean to put in it?'

O'Brien laughed outright. 'Ahem! Ah! Oh, friend Blake, you will be the death of me yet. The—the—medicine is not meant for ourselves. It is—oh, hold me somebody, will you?—it—it is the Indian or trapper name for beaver bait.'

'And who, I should like to know, could have found out that from your blundering way of putting it, and how in all the world is this very rum sort of medicine made, and do the beavers eat much of it?'

‘Och, murther ! Hold your tongue will you ? They don’t eat it, they smell it.’

‘Never mind. If they do smell it, it would be more correct to call it a scent bottle or something of that sort. Anyhow, whether they eat it or smell it, it has to be made, I suppose.’

‘You are about right there, and making it is no easy job, such extraordinary care requires to be taken to prevent it acquiring any human taint. The materials of which it is made are the roots and sappy branches of several aromatic plants and herbs, which it shall be my pleasing duty to point out to you from time to time in the woods.’

‘Thank you, O’Brien. Now go ahead, will you, unless you want to keep us up all night listening to your eloquence.’

‘Faix, you could not be much better employed ; but I am afraid it would be wearing out for myself. Ah, where was I ? At the roots—well, you gather them when you can get them, which is not every day, then you take some deer’s tallow, which you melt and strain, and then remelt and throw boiling hot into cold water, and then pot carefully for future use. You then take a little of this prepared tallow, the herbs, and roots.’

‘And mix them up, I suppose ?’

‘Yes ; but there are many ways of mixing things up. This particular mixture must be compounded after a certain regulation mode. You must select a conveniently large flat stone, and take it down to the creek, and wash it thoroughly, and then, with a good toss, throw it upon the bank. You must then put on an old pair of gloves, and, with all due ceremony, slowly approach the stone from the lee-side.’

‘Oh botheration, O’Brien ! this is coming it rather too strong. Don’t you think you have a good deal of the Baron Munchausen in you, *mon ami* ?’

‘On my honour as a gentleman, I am only stating the sober truth at present. If you wish your beaver medicine to be worth an old song, you must approach the aforesaid flat

stone with as much precaution as if it were the acute little wretch you intend to circumvent. When I was as green as you are, I made the same foolish objection to my Yankee preceptor, and thus said Kentuck Bill to me: "I guess, stranger, he is a cute man who can out-smart a beaver," and I guess I learned by experience that he was right. Well, you wait till the sun has dried the stone, and then, with a broad flat knife, you proceed to macerate the herbs upon it, and then to incorporate them with the grease, being very careful that you face the wind all the time. When it is prepared, it is put into the bait bottles, which are simply wide-mouthed vials, and carefully corked up; and now, my dear, I see you are half asleep, go away to bed, there's a good fellow, and dream of salmon-trout to breakfast.'

'I will leave that for you.'

'As you like; only we must be bright and early to-morrow morning for the beaver.'

Next day they went to set the traps, trudging on almost in silence till they got to the willow thickets which surrounded the beaver paradise on all sides.

'Now, Blake,' said O'Brien, 'look alive and do as I do; first we must cut a willow pole as large as a clothes-pole—this we must sharpen to a point—so; then we must each provide ourselves with two dozen slender osier wands, two feet long; and then we must go down to the side of the stream, and at first, you must be content to do nothing. It will take you all your time to watch me and observe what I do.'

'All right,' said Frank.

O'Brien then took a trap from the bundle which they had hauled down from the tree, set it, and tied the end of the chain to the pole—about a foot from the end—then, with the pole in his right hand and the trap in his left, he waded into the river—going a good bit up stream before he stopped. He then thrust his pole into the bottom of the river, and taking the trap in both his hands, held them and it under

the water for some minutes; then he placed it firmly on the ground, close to the edge of the stream, and about eight inches under the water. He then took from the belt round his waist one of the slender willow wands, cut it in two, and split up one end a great many times, till he had made a sort of tassel-brush of it. He then rinsed it well in the water, opened his medicine bottle, inserted the willow-brush, gave it a twist round, and taking it out, corked the bottle carefully.

Having thus medicined the bait-stick, he then drew it carefully under the water, leaving only the medicined brush at the end of it unsubmerged, and keeping his hand all the time well under the water, he planted it inside the jaws of the set trap, leaving it a few inches above the surface of the stream. Then, taking some more twigs, he passed them also under the water, and planted them in the river-bed, making a sort of V shaped avenue to the set trap. He then took up the pole, waded out a bit, pushed it as far into deep water as the length of the chain would allow, and planted it as firmly as possible. He then waded back to the bank, splashing a lot of water over it to wash away the taint of his steps, sprang ashore, and making a low bow, said :

‘Monsieur, I have the honour to announce that the performance is finished, all but the last act of the tragedy, and for that we must not wait.’

‘And do you mean to tell me the creature will walk into that?’

‘Why, yes, I reckon he will; the beaver, you must know, loves the merry moonshine, and this very night, I expect—paddling along, in the centre of the stream, by the light of that blessed luminary—his olfactory nerves will be tickled by the alluring smell of the medicined bait, and, like a rash and reckless beaver, instead of steering straight forward, he will dally with temptation. He will first of all stop short and sniff the balmy air, then he will turn, and finally, he will swim in its direction; but if he is an old hand, he will make his advances very, very slowly. He will make a most

careful examination first, and then, if he detects nothing to alarm him, he will swim into the avenue of twigs, and in due time arrive close to the bait-stick. He will then raise his nose towards the scented top, but alas! alas! it is just an inch or two above his reach. Inspired by the delicious odour, he is no longer so careful; he gives a quick paddle or two in the water to raise himself, one of his feet strikes the pan of the trap, click goes the spring, and he is a gone beaver. Immediately he turns and strikes out for deeper water, when the chain fastened to the pole drags him out of his depth, and he is drowned.'

'And this, I presume, is the end of the programme?'

'Yes, until we arrive next morning to take possession; but the little drama does not always end so favourably for us, by any manner of means. If he should chance, through any bungling in the setting of the trap, to escape drowning, he will swim ashore, and there he will lunge and pull at the chain all night, till he gets up the pole. He will then drag it ashore, cut the chain from it, take to shallow water, and paddle along till he reaches some hole.'

'But, perhaps, the stake may be driven so well home that his utmost efforts may fail to move it.'

'Granted—that is certainly possible; but even then our friend is by no means at the end of his resources, instead of giving way to despair, he will sit quietly down and amputate his paw, and so escape.'

'Now, there you are at your Munchausen tricks again. You never seem to suspect, O'Brien, that there is a good deal of skill required to pull the long-bow, and if it is not done well, it had better not be done at all.'

'Oh! it is that you are at, is it? My dear fellow, I will just tell you what once happened to myself. I was green then—I don't mind owning that, although I was never at any time nearly so verdant as you are, and I was out beaver trapping in just such a pool as this. I had six traps, and for a time I did very well; but one morning, what do you think I found in my six traps?'

‘Six beavers, I suppose, if you were particularly lucky.’

‘Not a bit of it—six paws. I had bungled it somehow, smart as I thought myself, and every thief of a beaver had gone and amputated its paw, and then cut its stick, without giving so much as a thought to me. It was abominably selfish, and it was, as nearly as possible, the ruin of me in body and estate.’

‘But that, surely, does not happen every day?’

‘Oh, my verdant, verdant, verdant pet! it is easy to see that it’s little you know about beavers. Why, man, when a castor has once been driven to bite off his paw, you may trap for a hundred years in that pool, but you will never catch another beaver there. I tried it, and among them, they almost extinguished me. My grub and profits were alike gone. I used to skin the beavers and eat ’em. Now there were no beavers either to skin or eat.’

‘After such an alarming account, I am almost terrified to try my hand at beaver trapping.’

‘Nay, never look glum; I did not mean to discourage you. “Never venture never win” holds true of beaver trapping as of other things. I only meant to point out to you that it is not all smooth sailing, even on a tranquil beaver pond. The pursuit has its difficulties, like everything else.’

They had a busy day of it before they got all their traps set; and when they started to trudge home at night, they were so wet, that they were positively soaked to above the waist; and in the keen piercing wind their clothes froze so hard that they encased them like suits of armour, and by their unbending rigidity considerably impeded their progress.

‘My poor mother!’ said Frank, at last, ‘how terrified she used to be lest I should get my feet damp!—what would she say if she could only see me now?’

‘She would give herself no end of worry, poor woman,’ said O’Brien, ‘and you well-know, Blake, you are not worth any woman bothering herself about, so I am glad your mother,

excellent woman, is saved from such a work of supererogation. Egad! but it is cold. Why, oh, why was I, so delicately nurtured, driven forth to worship Mammon in this arctic zone?

‘Bless my life, I thought you liked it!’

‘Liked it? Mother of Moses! I am a man like yourself. I am afraid, friend Blake, you are as selfish as a beaver, only not so clever. I suppose you think I have no feelings, or that mine lie so far, far down in the folds of my warm heart, that they are beyond the reach of cold.’

‘Well, as you say sometimes, O’Brien, the longest day comes to an end at last. Yonder, twinkling through the cedar boughs, is “the dainty blythe blink o’ oor ain fireside.”’

‘Home! sweet, sweet home!’ interjected O’Brien. ‘That blessed Pompey! What would life be without him, and his savoury stews and juicy roasts? I say, Blake, has it never struck you, that we poor benighted individuals out here, at the world’s end, can appreciate a good meal a thousand times more than the wealthy and pampered epicures of civilised society? Oh, my dear boy! we have much to be thankful for.’

Blake laughed outright.

‘What the bother are you laughing at now, my dear sir?’

‘The intense cold, O’Brien. An effect of the intense cold. It—it—it’s only to save myself from freezing alive; but don’t I warn you not to trust always to Pompey—the best shot is sometimes unsuccessful, and we must expect to be on short commons now and then.’

‘Mother of Moses! do you mane to say that there will be nothing comfortable for us on such a night as this? Such a prospect literally makes my heart die within me.’

‘There will be hot tea, and there’s cold meat in the safe, I know that.’

‘Hot tea! Cold meat! Faugh!’ muttered O’Brien, in a tone of intense distrust, and he trudged on, disconsolate enough, to find that Pompey had considerably provided an exceptionally good supper.

CHAPTER XVI.

CHRISTMAS AT CEDAR CREEK.

'Gently stir and blow the fire,
Lay the ven'son down to roast;
Dress it quickly, I desire:
In the dripping put a toast.'

DEAN SWIFT.

For some weeks all went well with them; their traps were always full, and their packs grew apace, and although the weather had gradually become very severe, they were constantly out in the woods making their lonely trapping rounds. The cold was intense, but there was no wind, and their constant fatiguing exercise and the heavy clothing they wore sufficed to keep them warm. It was now close upon Christmas, and they had made great preparations to do all due honour to the day. O'Brien turned out from the inmost recesses of one of his packs the materials for a plum-pudding, but as he did so, he uttered a dismal howl of alarm:

'Och! och! Unlucky beggar that I am. To think I have carried it all this way, that we might keep Christmas out here in a proper orthodox fashion, and now just look at this.'

'What on earth are you making such a row about?' said Frank, who was busy decorating the hut with bunches of a bright scarlet berry he had found in the woods.

'That's a good one. Just look here, will you? This thief of a paper has got, I can't tell you how many holes in it, and the fruit has all got out, and got mixed with caps and bits of tobacco, and I don't know what.'

'Well, the more ingredients the better mixture, eh, O'Brien?'

'I declare you are worse than an absolute heathen, and

you are so taken up with your woman's work there, that you cannot give a moment's sober thought even to the weightiest matters. Joke about a ruined plum-pudding—bless my life, is there anything in the world you hold sacred?

'But why should the pudding be ruined? If you don't like the foreign ingredients, pick 'em out.'

O'Brien made a wry face, but finally, with an irritable grin, settled to his tiresome task; it being a work requiring too much care and time to be devolved upon Pompey, who professed himself entirely ignorant of the mysteries of plum-pudding making, and to make the matter worse, displayed no inclination to learn. In these circumstances, and in view of the importance of the dish at stake, O'Brien resolved to remain at home and devote his own time and energies to the preparation of the time-honoured pudding; while Frank, having finished his decorations, went off to the woods and returned with a couple of fine fat turkeys, and Pompey, nearer home, contributed, as his share to the feast, a plump porcupine.

Christmas-day broke bitterly cold; the wind, with particles of snow floating before it, blew in fitful gusts from the north-east. They had, however, abundance of firewood, and gave themselves no concern about the bitter blasts which were blowing outside. Inside, where the great fire crackled and blazed, it was warm enough, and there was a jolly smell of roasting and stewing and boiling; and whenever the door was opened, fragrant gusts of steam floated out upon the icy wind. At and around the fire all went merry as a marriage-bell. O'Brien, with puffs of flour on his hair, and dabs of it on his keen weatherbeaten face, hung with fond solicitude over the camp-kettle, in which his darling pudding boiled with a bubbling simmer which was sweeter to his ear than the music of the spheres.

'Bless my life!' he cried at last, after a long rapt gaze of affectionate solicitude; 'it weighs twelve pounds if it weighs an ounce!—I am surprised at you, Blake.'



‘Frank returned with a couple of fine fat turkeys.’

[Page 152.]

'Why, what have I been doing amiss, now?'

'Hang it! what have you not been doing amiss? You are so indifferent. I declare you have not once looked into the kettle—one would fancy you dined on plum-pudding every day. Oh, you may laugh, but it's true.'

'My dear O'Brien, how can you be so absurd? How can I look into the kettle, were I ever so anxious to get a peep at the culinary curiosity simmering in it, when your nose is always within a couple of inches of it. It must be regularly parboiled, I should think, by this time.'

'Mother of Moses, so it is! and just look how it has swollen. Help, Pompey, help! Have you no feelings, Blake? Can you stand giggling there, and see me visibly swelling out into one gigantic nose? For the love of mercy, give me a clout dipped in cold water! I can't leave the pot here; I am glued to my post. Something might go wrong, and then I should never be able to forgive myself.'

'Pompey!' cried his master, almost choking with suppressed laughter, 'hand me over that wet cloth, will you?'

'But, massa, no see,' remonstrated Pompey, 'dat dat my dishclout.'

'Faix! there's no great choice of clouts here,' ejaculated the sufferer. 'Quick, quick! it will do well enough.'

'But top, massa, top!'

'I can't stop, you villain. Throw it to me, will you? My nose is evidently bewitched. Is this a time to stand upon trifles?'

Pompey's countenance assumed an irresolute expression; he saw he was being regularly cornered up, so summoning up all his courage, he seized the article in dispute, which was crumpled up into a wet round mass, and threw it at a venture right across the roaring fire.

Straight as an arrow it flew through the smoke and steam, and alighted with a bash right upon O'Brien's scalded and swollen nose.

'Oh, deary me, deary me! What me do now?' cried

Pompey, wringing his hands, and apparently in the greatest misery at the mishap.

As for Frank, he stood mute, thunderstruck, expecting an explosion, but for a moment none came. All that was audible was a hollow gurgling sound, and then: 'Och, murther! what a mouthful, I'm dead—poisoned. Frank Blake, where are you? Help! help! Oh, it is unspeakably nasty!' and tearing it off, he dashed it to the other end of the hut, where Nero seized and made off with it. 'Zounds! what is this?' as some white substance came trickling down upon the breast of his coat. 'As I am a living or rather a dead man, the blood-thirsty cannibal has knocked my brains out. Mother of Moses, Blake! what are you staring at? If I am not dead I shall soon be, and yet you don't offer to help me, even so much as by watching this pudding, which I shall have to bequeath to you as my last will and testament.'

But Blake was for the moment neither to hold nor to bind. He was absolutely suffocating with laughter, and it was all he could do to articulate, in a choking voice, 'I'll stand guard over the pot with pleasure, till you wash yourself.'

'Wash myself! Egad, I'll leave that to you! I won't waste my small remaining strength in the tub, I promise you. I have that black scoundrel to punish first. Where is the villain? Oh, this is the cruellest cut of all. Blake, you are conniving with him. Murder! What is this? My eyelids are weighed down, absolutely soldered to my cheeks, I can no longer see—it must be—ugh! it must be creeping paralysis. It is all up with me, I can no longer stand,' and sinking back, he plumped helplessly into a rude tub which Pompey had constructed out of a barrel, by simply cutting it in two. This, as it chanced, was filled with water, fortunately not boiling, but yet unpleasantly hot, and there he sat, unable to extricate himself, his feet and legs sticking up in the air, screeching, as loud as he could bawl: 'Help! help! murder! I am dying.'

'Never fear,' said Frank, 'you'll do yet, my dear! Your

voice is tolerably strong for one *in extremis*. Lend a hand, Pompey, and we'll haul him out, and give him a good scrubbing into the bargain, and then he can dress for dinner.'

'I have eaten my last dinner,' said O'Brien, in a faint resigned tone, 'but it will save trouble afterwards. You may do what you like with me.'

'To be sure I will. There, now that that mass of filth is cleared away from your face, how do you feel?'

'Why,' said O'Brien, sitting down composedly and folding his arms, 'I feel very much as usual. What a fool a lively fancy makes of us, after all. Come in, Pompey, and make yourself at home, my sable hero, and there's a good soul, try if you can find some dry clothes for me—I don't think it would be quite safe for me to move; I feel somehow all par-boiled over—and oh, Blake, I adjure you, by all you hold dear, look after that pudding!'

Pompey now pronounced the turkey roasted to a turn, the porcupine spoke for itself by a most appetizing and savoury perfume, and O'Brien, being helped upon his feet, hobbled to the pot, and carefully hoisting up the precious pudding, tried it with a fork and pronounced it quite ready.

The turkey and porcupine were found very good and done full justice to, but there was nothing special or distinctive about their excellence; the whole interest of this Christmas feast centred, as of right, in its crowning glory, the pudding.

'Upon my word,' said Frank, 'the proof of the pudding, as we all know, is the eating of it, and this pudding is delicious. O'Brien, it is first rate, it really does you credit!'

'If I could speechify with any effect,' said O'Brien, in a plaintive voice, 'I would make a speech in honour of that pudding, but eloquence is the gift of heaven. Have some more, Pompey; there is still a little left, and I absolutely cannot swallow another mouthful.'

'Yes, massa,' said Pompey, grinning; 'me, Pompey, will take a leetle; dat is berry good pudding; me would be foolish person to refuse dat.'

All this while the storm was thundering outside; but at last it blew itself out—the fitful gusts became less and less frequent, and all was still. Pompey made up the fire for the night, Frank, as usual, read the evening prayer, and after a prolonged smoke by the flickering light of the fire, they all turned in to their bunks and slept soundly.

A few hours after midnight Frank awoke, and was struck, as he always was, by the silence and impressiveness of the wild scene around. Not a murmur broke the absolute stillness. It was so cold that sound itself seemed frozen, and he was in the act of stooping to stir up the slumbering fire, when a wild yell burst upon his ears. It was so shrill, so unearthly, so demoniac, so unexpected in that moment of profound unbroken silence, that he got completely unnerved, and let fall a heavy log which he was going to put upon the fire.

The noise awoke O'Brien, who sat up and stared sleepily around him.

Again the same unearthly cry rung through the startled air.

‘Do you hear that?’ said Frank. ‘What on earth is it?—it sounds as if murder were being done somewhere!’

‘Well, so there is, but there’s no help for it!’—a loud yawn.

‘Zounds, O’Brien! but there must be help for it. Come, get up, and let us turn out. We may be still in time to save some fellow creature’s life.’

‘No—no,’ snorted O’Brien. ‘No use trying—it’s quite useless; it is only a carcajou.’

‘Only a what?’

‘Can’t you let a fellow be?’—rubbing his eyes, and sinking back upon his grassy couch. ‘Can I be choosing words to suit you at this time of night? The Indians call him Kek-waharkess, which, being interpreted, means the evil one.’

‘But what is he about? Who is he murdering?’

‘Mother of Moses! You are very unreasonable, Blake; that is the affair of the carcajou and his friends—you will know soon enough; but if you will have it—he is—he is murdering me!’ A loud prolonged snore.

Greatly puzzled, Frank opened the door, and looked out. The moon shone out from behind the fitting clouds, and each sough of the gusty wind shook down from the laden branches a shower of light snow-flakes. The most utter silence, the most intense solitude, seemed now around him. Grasping his rifle in his hands, and with sight and hearing strained to the greatest tension, he crept from crag to brushwood, and from tree to crag again, stalking his unseen, unknown foe, with the utmost vigilance and stealth. In vain, he could see nothing, he could hear nothing; the tragedy—if tragedy it were—was evidently now an accomplished fact, and half frozen into an icicle with the intense cold, he was fain to crawl back to bed again, fully expecting to be unmercifully chaffed by O'Brien for his outing in the morning.

O'Brien, however, in the morning, was in no mood for chaffing. 'I can assure you,' he said, 'this is very serious. It is a mercy that we have got such a nice little lot of pelts together, for it's precious few more we'll get now.'

'I don't see that. The furred animals seem as abundant as ever.'

'Aye, but the carcajou, the wolverine, the thrice accursed evil one of the red-skins, has appeared, and I am much afraid the game is up.'

'Very odd, that. Why, you don't mean to say that the creature is so very dreadful.'

'Mother of Moses! but I do. Sure, it's that I mean, and nothing either less or more. Of all the trapper's enemies, the wolverine is the worst.'

'Pray, what like is it?'

'I'll paint the beauty for you in a minute. Many's the time I have seen it, and cursed it too, in lieu of more substantial vengeance. Imagine, if you can, an animal a little larger than a fox, with a long stout square body, and short, very strong legs. He has large claws on his broad feet, as you will see, when you have the pleasure of examining his sign-manual on the snow outside.'

'He is no great size, then. What special qualities has he to make him so dreaded?'

'First and foremost is his destructiveness, then his cunning, and lastly, what I may call his dishonest laziness.'

'You don't mean to say that he steals?'

'I do, though. He has quite sagacity enough to hunt for himself, but instead of that, he joins himself on to some unfortunate party of trappers, follows their trail with untiring assiduity, and breaks open in succession all their traps. If the trap is empty, he devours the bait; if an animal is caught in it, he seizes and devours it, and those he cannot eat, he carries off and hides, sometimes burying them in the snow, and sometimes climbing with them to the top of some lofty tree; but *en avant*, come along and we shall see. Look, there are the footprints of our friend.'

'That is an enormous track—as large as a man's hand.'

'Yes, the animal is heavy and immensely strong, but not large. It resembles very much a shaggy brown dog. Look, here is the first of his work: he never touches the door of a trap—he is too cunning for that—he breaks open a hole behind; and I declare, as I live by turkey and porcupine's flesh, there's the tail of a marten.'

'So it is. It is too bad.'

'Isn't it; but wait till we have made the rounds, and then I'll give you leave to curse the vicious brute.'

That night, when they returned home hungry, tired and disappointed from their fruitless rounds, they were both so much down in the mouth, that all Pompey's skill in cooking, aided by a bright fire and the comfortable sense of rest, was unable to raise their spirits. Even O'Brien swallowed his supper as if he were altogether unaware that they were more than usually choice morsels he was bolting, and after the meal was finished, they both smoked in the fire-light in moody silence, till at last Frank said: 'Can we do nothing to rid ourselves of this pest?'

'I am afraid not much.'

'You don't mean to say that we are to be sat upon by a shaggy brown wretch of a quadruped not much bigger than a fox.'

'I do say that he is a very wise creature, so extra smart, that the man who out-smarts him may take out a diploma for 'cuteness as soon as he likes.'

'Is he difficult to trap?'

'So difficult that it is almost an impossibility. These traps we make for martens, fishers, foxes, and the rest, are quite useless for him. He will not so much as look at the door; he scrambles in by the back and devours the bait. Sometimes, by great good luck, it is possible to poison a wolverine, and sometimes also he has been known to be caught in a steel trap, but it requires to be very strong. A trap that will catch a wolf will not hold a wolverine.'

'But what in the wide world does he do with it? Does he bite off his paw, as the beavers do?'

'No; he lifts the trap in his mouth, and makes as fast as he can for the nearest river, and travels down the bed of the stream till he thinks he is safe from pursuit; then he comes ashore, and devotes all his energies, and they are neither few nor small, to the demolition of the trap and the enfranchisement of his imprisoned paw.'

'And is there no other way of killing him?'

'There is one which we will try to-morrow. It succeeds, I dare say, as often as any. We must place a gun in such a position, that it shall bear full upon a piece of bait to which the trigger is attached by a string.'

'That should do the business, I think.'

'Yes; but we must not be too sanguine. I will see that it is all properly managed to-morrow, and meanwhile, we must devote our energies to beaver.'

Next evening there were many speculations as to the probable fate of the wolverine, whose wild shrill cry could be heard as it prowled around searching for the trapper's trail.

'There he goes,' said Frank, 'a perfect marplot to all our little schemes of peltries and pelf. I should like to murder him outright—to bruise him as flat as a pancake. Do you think he will take the bait?'

'I have little doubt of that, but he is a creature of infinite curiosity, as well as of great sagacity; and however hungry he is, he will make a most minute investigation before he settles down to his supper; and if he finds anything to arouse his suspicions, he will never stop until he has ferreted it out.'

Next morning they could scarcely take time to swallow their breakfast, so eager were they to ascertain the fate of their four-footed enemy. Breathless with suspense and haste, they reached the cedar glade, where the engine of destruction was hidden, only to recoil and stare upon each other with faces blank with disappointment and despair. What they saw was not the shattered and lifeless form of the hapless wolverine, but the marks in the snow which showed where the astute evil one had made a comfortable supper the night before, by simply gnawing in two the string which communicated with the trigger of the gun and then devouring the bait.

'Sold!' cried O'Brien, when he recovered his voice. 'Utterly, entirely, completely sold! and the accursed carcajou, I have no doubt, is laughing at us at this very moment in some snug retreat.'

'I can almost believe it, after seeing this; and now, I suppose, we are at the end of our resources, and as the wretch won't decamp, we must.'

'Hang it, then, I won't; I have got more of the proper grit in me than that. This is a tip-top trapping place, and I mean to stay in it. Aye, and to be square with that darned crittur yet, to use the phraseology proper to the occasion.'

'But how do you mean to circumvent our persecutor? What is there that you can do?'

'I will try the gun-trick again, but this time I will set it in the dark, and I will put the gun in a tree, so that it shall be completely screened by the thick branches; and I shall place it so, of course, that it bears vertically upon the bait, which I shall suspend to a branch; and if that does not do, I shall watch beside one of the traps all night, and shoot the thief in the very act. One thing I have made up my mind to: I will not give in.'

Night fell stormy and wild; such a night as makes most folks glad of a cheerful fire, at which to toast their shins and warm their hands. Snow was falling at intervals, and the wind, moaning through the forest, shrieked and whistled shrilly among the great boughs of the cedars, shaking the frail shanty fiercely, and now and then sending a shower of hailstones down the wide chimney. Even Nero moved uneasily about: now running to one, now to another, and always ending by pressing close up against his especial friend Pompey, nuzzling and whining when some great gust crashed through the cedar boughs overhead, and looking into the negro's face in search of that comfort which he had not to give.

The great trees bowed like bulrushes before the fury of the tempest, and tossed their giant arms aloft, and creaked and swayed and groaned as if their last hour had come, and wrathfully ground their trunks together, and wrestled manfully with the violence of the hurricane.

'A fine night this, Frank, dear!' said O'Brien, opening the door in a lull of the tempest, and looking out. 'A night in which I think even the all-present wolverine must be safe in his hole.'

'I should think so,' said Frank; 'but do you know this awful lull in the tempest seems to me even more appalling than its fury; the wind has fallen, but there is an eerie melancholy sigh in the tree tops, which seems to me to forebode mischief.'

'Any way, come storm or calm,' said O'Brien, 'now is

my time,' and taking his capote, rifle, and the materials for the proposed trap, he strode manfully forth.

'Come back !' cried Frank ; 'come back, O'Brien. It is only tempting Providence to go out in such a storm.'

But he returned no answer, and was soon lost to sight and sound ; while Frank and Pompey, closing the door, went back to the fire, and listened uneasily to the tempest. The short lull was over ; and again the storm in all its fierceness rushed over the silent valley, tearing through the forest, crashing along the hill sides, and bearing to the ground, with a dull heavy thud, many a leafy monarch of the wood. Not a star was visible—not a gleam of moonlight ; the darkness was awful—such as could be felt. As for Nero, he had laid himself down before the fire, with his nose resting on his forepaws. His eyes were shut, and he might have been supposed asleep, but for the incessant twitchings of his ears, which every now and then he pricked up, uttering at the same time a low, nervous whine.

'What dis be ? What you yeerie now, my shild ?' said the negro, slipping down beside him and putting his arm round his neck. 'What you tink, eh, Nero ?'

The dog answered by a long, low howl.

'What you yow for, good dog ? What you yeerie, eh, Nero ?'

'Hush ! what was that ? A shot, eh, Pompey ?'

'Yes, massa, yes. What you tink ob dat ? him found moose, perhaps, and yet why him shoot—him know we hab plenty in de safe ?'

'He could not resist the temptation of a moose though,' settling back into his old position over the fire, for it was a night on which a shivering wretch behoved to do all he could to keep himself warm.

Even Pompey gave himself up to visions of moose flesh, and the stewing and roasting and guzzling attendant there-upon.

About half an hour passed, but neither O'Brien nor the

moose venison appeared, and Frank began to get uneasy, then another shot was heard, and then, after the interval of a few minutes, another.

‘What can he be firing at, Pompey?’

‘Me cannot tell what to tink massa. Suppose one bear hab treed him?’

‘Bless my life, no. It is impossible—the night is too dark; but he is in some fix or other—these shots are evidently signals; we must go at once and look for him.’

Pompey started up in a moment with the greatest alacrity, only remarking to his four-footed ally. ‘We go look for Massa O’Brien, Nero,’ and in a minute or two, the three started off into the blackness of the night, tumbling over each other, and tripping up over fallen trees and fragments of rock, until they were at last fain to trust themselves almost solely to Nero’s guidance.

‘Him hab more sense than most men,’ said Pompey. ‘Top till I say to him, we go look for Massa O’Brien; now you see him take us dere.’

‘But where are we? We seem to have got among the reeds and prickly bushes in the marsh down beside the creek; I feel almost torn in pieces.’

‘No, massa, it is de marsh behind de cedar ridge, and now massa de dog see someting—I know, I feel dat.’

‘But how can you know, for it is as dark as pitch?’

‘I hab hold of his tail, massa, and me feel him pulling teady—right on. Me know him hab seen someting, or hab got de smell ob him.’

‘True, he may be tracking him in that way,’ said Frank, following as best he could, with a little more confidence that the toilsome journey would lead to some result; and so it did.

Under a spreading cedar-tree, Nero came to a dead stand, scraping with his feet, and poking at something with his nose, uttering all the time a low fondling whine.

'He hab found him,' cried Pompey joyfully. 'Oh, de good dog !'

And so in truth it turned out. But they had come barely in time : O'Brien was already insensible from the cold, and by aid of a light which Frank struck, they discovered that one of his legs was broken at the ankle.

'What we do now ?' said Pompey. 'Poor Massa O'Brien ! him will die.'

'Heaven forbid,' said Frank. 'Let us first of all get him home, and then we must devise some means of getting his leg set. Here, take you his head. We must be very careful not to jerk the wounded limb, and how we are to manage that, if we are to go back by the same road as we came, I cannot even imagine.'

'Let me speak to de dog, massa ; him hab sense, as I tell massa often, more sense dan Christian man. Now, Nero, we mosh go home—take we home, good dog, de way we always go.'

Nero gave a short intelligent bark, and Pompey, catching hold of his waving tail with his teeth, for his arms and hands were sufficiently occupied, immediately said, with joyful alacrity, 'Now him know, massa. Him take us home by de right road, nebber fear, massa ; me hab hold ob him tail.'

With desperate misgivings Frank elected to follow, for it seemed the only thing he could do, and fortunately Pompey's reliance on Nero's sagacity did not turn out misplaced ; the dog took them in the murky darkness straight home, and, if not by the usual road, yet by one as smooth and good. By the time they reached the shanty, the sufferer was conscious, and startled them both by sitting up on his bed, on which they had laid him, and hurrahing violently, clapping his hands and ejaculating—'I have killed him, I have killed that darned wolverine. I shot the cursed thief just as he was creeping up behind that outlying dead fall of yours, friend Blake.'

‘But think of yourself, my darling little man,’ said Frank. ‘And of that poor leg of yours.’

‘Why, what is wrong with it?’ he asked, stretching out his hands towards it with a scared, anxious look.

‘My dear fellow, it is broken; but don’t look glum—we will contrive some way to get it set. I don’t mean to reflect upon my poor father, who always acted for the best as far as he knew it; but I am sure, if I had only got a course of medicine and surgery, instead of Latin and Greek, it would have stood me in good stead now.’

O’Brien groaned, and lay back with his eyes closed, and an expression of mute suffering on his face, till Pompey, sidling up to his master, said confidentially: ‘As Massa Brien ill, we no hab regular cooked supper to-night—what you tink, massa?’

‘Whatever you like, Pompey, whatever gives least trouble.’

Pompey grinned. ‘Ah, me know my massa say dat!’ quoth he, and straightway betook himself to his simplified cooking arrangements, which were as follows: First, he made himself a simple cake of flour and water, which he rolled out as thin as a biscuit, then he scored it with a knife, put it on a tin plate and propped it up before the clear glowing embers to bake. In a very few minutes, it was beautifully crisp and brown. This, as he had no great wealth of plates, he put upon a clean piece of birch bark, and prepared another, till he had got a good large pile of them. Then with his hunting knife, he cut some antelope meat into slices, beat it well with the handle of the knife, then cut it into small pieces, and proceeded to toast the pieces over the clear, bright fire, producing a supply of kabobs, rich, juicy and tender. Frank, meanwhile, had been preparing some tea—real China this time, with a view to the delectation of the invalid—and it now mingled its fragrant perfume with the savoury odours of the meat and bread, till O’Brien could endure it no longer.

'Pompey, my friend!' he said plaintively, 'I feel as if I could eat a mouthful—that meat looks perfection.'

'But, Massa O'Brien,' remonstrated Pompey, 'if you eat meat your leg shall cure him none at all—your blood shall get all inflammation, and den where you be? Massa Frank dere cannot laugh—dat is, if him will but tink ob de fearful ting it would be, for bote ob we, if de leg mosh be cut off.'

'You croaking raven!' cried O'Brien, in high wrath. 'Are you going to pay off your nigger tricks upon a gentleman like me, and starve me, actually starve me to death? At such a moment, too, when my strength requires to be kept up!'

'No, no, not tarve, massa!' protested Pompey. 'Look at dis panada, dis nice leetle panada, dat Pompey make for massa,' tendering at the same time a whity-brown stringy mess of glue-like consistency. 'Here de nice bootiful panada; take a leetle ob it, massa. It do massa good; it trengthen him tomack—no inflammation in dat.'

'No, but a taste of patent blacking, the least thing in the world,' said O'Brien, seizing the uninviting platter, and throwing it right into Pompey's face.

'Murder!' roared the negro, snorting and snuffing, and then setting up a loud howl. 'Oh, deary me, deary me!'

'Why the deuce make such a yelling, blackie?' said O'Brien with the utmost composure. 'He bootiful panada—will do you good, trengthen your patience, and enlarge your comprehension. You will know, after this, that when it comes to be a question between a gentleman and his supper, he is not to be trifled with.'

'Massa not politeful,' whimpered Pompey, 'not respectful berry mosh, to coloured gentleman.'

'I will be most respectful, Pompey. I will be the pink of politeness, if you will only bring me a decent supper. Zounds, man! what are you staring at? Are you a Nero. Have you a heart of flesh in that black breast of yours. Blake, if you mean me to be starved alive, it does discredit,

I think, to your judgment, to select such a moment for beginning the experiment—I say nothing of your heart.’

A slight smile involuntarily curled Frank’s lips, but he immediately repressed it. ‘Two such old friends as you and I are now, O’Brien, understand each other, or ought to. You cannot make me angry with you, do as you will. I certainly think Pompey was right, and that the contemned panada would have been far better for you in the circumstances; but, I suppose, you are hungry, and so here is your supper.’

‘Thanks, old ally. Why, to be plain with you, I think you and Pompey too are quite wrong about the panada—the great object of medical men nowadays, I understand, is to support the strength. Now, the aforesaid Pompey, and be hanged to him, actually tried to persuade me to go in for his abominable slops. I tremble to think what the consequences might have been, if I had been weak enough to yield.’

‘And I,’ muttered Frank, ‘tremble to think what the consequences may be as it is;’ then, in a louder tone: ‘Does your leg pain you much, O’Brien?’

‘It is sore, deucedly sore, and what is almost worse, it has swollen tremendously. I thought at first it was a flea bite, but I assure you now, I am as uncomfortable as any gentleman need be.’

‘But how are we to get it set. What on earth are we to do about that?’

‘I have it,’ said O’Brien, after a few moments of anxious thought. ‘Eh, Frank, my love, do you know that I really thought I would have to amputate it myself, like the beavers. A nate little experiment, but a trifle painful—not to spake of the inconvenience of the thing; but now, I think, of it, I have heard often that old Ike Taylor at the Pablo Ranche, at the head of the Colorado valley, can set bones, and has a nostrum too, of some kind or other, that lays the swelling.’

'And how far is it off, pray?'

'A matter of fifty miles or so—I really don't think it is more. A trifle, a matter of mere child's play.'

'Yes, for ourselves, but how are we to get you there, friend?'

'The easiest thing in the world,' said O'Brien, with a yawn; 'Pompey will carry me—he has done it before.'

'Oh, but dat was long ago!' protested Pompey. 'Der massa was small and light, like one picaninny—now, massa, him grow fat. Nice little man, but berry round, berry fat, like him porpoise.'

'Zounds! am I to lie here and listen while my fair proportions, faultless as those of the Apollo Belvidere, are criticised by an ignorant self-sufficient blackamoor?'

'And anoder ting I must speak of,' persisted Pompey, doggedly. 'Me weak as water, now de cold hab took soch a terrible hold upon me dat me tink me is going to dead. Pompey berry sorry for himself, dat for true, massa.'

'No help there,' groaned the invalid. 'I say, Frank dear, have you ever observed—but I need not ask, for you never observe anything—what an absolute, complete unapproachable incarnation of laziness a negro is?'

'But I really do not believe he could manage it, O'Brien, were he ever so willing.'

'Yes, take his part, do. Why, man, can't you cut your coat by me. Do I ever fail in delicate sympathy for the woes of others?'

'You certainly feel your own very acutely.'

'I would be worse than a Nero if I did not. Ach, what is to come of me? I must make the journey on a *travail*, there is no help for it.'

'But what on earth is a *travail*?'

'There again, now,' said O'Brien, with an irritable groan. 'What is a *travail*? I declare I never saw such an ignorant pack. I am ten times worse off than any medieval martyr of them all. The martyr was simply tortured; he had not

in addition, to design and superintend the construction of the instrument of his own misery.'

'But all this does not explain to us what a *travaille* is?'

'It is a hurdle—a vile hurdle. Ach! speak no more of it. I am done for, Pompey. Frank Blake, my dear, I am done for—utterly extinguished—snuffed out. Oh, dear! oh, dear!'

Next morning at daybreak Frank started off to seek the horses, while Pompey undertook to make a *travaille* under the supervision of O'Brien, who had spent a sleepless night, and was in a very uneasy, irritable condition.

Fortunately the tracks of the horses had been lately seen, so Frank knew in what direction to turn. He had no difficulty in following their trail; and, by special good luck, he came up with them feeding in a little open sheltered valley not five miles away. They were wild and full of spirit, and as fat as balls, and he had no little trouble in catching a couple of them; but at last he succeeded, and returned home in triumph, to find that Pompey had managed to improvise a species of rude sledge—a rough enough turn out, in all conscience, but still incomparably superior to the *travaille*.

O'Brien, delighted with his ingenuity and success, was again on the most amicable terms with him, and was in pretty good spirits as regarded himself. A hasty meal was then made, a sufficient quantity of pemmican and tea packed to serve the journey, a quantity of buffalo and wolf-skins brought out and placed upon the sledge, and then the sufferer himself, groaning frightfully, was brought out and laid upon them, and carefully strapped down and tucked up snug and warm by poor Pompey, who shed a plentiful flood of tears at the sight of his distress, and the prospect of his own solitude, for he was to be left to keep house at Cedar Creek, with only Nero as a companion.

Pursuing an open track through the woods, they were

able to travel fast on the frozen snow, and, fortunately, the weather, which had been exceptionally stormy, cleared up, and became bright and fine.

All day they kept on almost in a straight line, and late in the afternoon, passed over a frozen lake. It was beginning to get dark, and the wind rising as evening fell, blew so keenly right in their teeth, that O'Brien began to complain piteously of cold, while Frank hurried the horses on as fast as he could, to gain the shelter of a wood which he saw beyond.

'Let us stop here,' said O'Brien, 'under this clump of pines, or I shall get frost bitten all over.'

'I declare,' said Frank, 'that I am so cold myself, that I can scarcely strike a light.'

'Try,' said O'Brien, in his most quizzical tone. 'Try, my dear little lad, it's not so hard as learning to read; and if at first you don't succeed, "Try, try, try again"; for if you make a *fiasco* of it, you and I will be no better than two solid icicles by this time to-morrow.'

'One of us will be very solid indeed,' muttered Frank, setting to work again with an assiduity which was at last rewarded by a tiny jet of flame, which gradually increased into a respectable blaze. Then they had pemmican and tea—O'Brien, although he made a hearty meal, never ceasing to grumble at the lenten fare and the cold. For which last he had some reason, for even with a roaring fire, the cold was so intense that they shivered under their load of buffalo skins, and Frank was obliged to get up to pile fresh wood on the flame whenever it burnt down a little. Next morning they started off again at a rattling pace, for O'Brien constantly called out for speed.

'To go fast,' he said, 'hurts me as little as to go slow, and the more quickly we get over the ground, the more quickly will my torture come to an end.'

They now came to a more open region, and then to what O'Brien called a windfall. This was a wide stretch of the

forest in which all the trees had been uprooted by the late violent gales. Many had fallen to the ground, but some had caught in each other's branches and stood half-standing, half-propped up, leaning, an unsteady swaying mass, against each other—like a forest of arboreal monsters, sprung from and twined into an inextricable chaos. The only way to get over this difficulty was to make a detour, and by the time that was done, the sun was getting low, and they resolved to camp. This night was not so cold, and Frank, moreover, shot a squirrel, which proved tender and fat; and being roasted by the aid of a couple of sticks, so invigorated O'Brien and raised his spirits, that he declared he felt equal to singing Phaudrig Croohoore, and actually did warble a stave of it:

‘Oh, Phaudrig Croohoore was the broth of a boy,
And he stood six foot eight,
And his arm was as round as another man's thigh,
’Tis Phaudrig was great.
And his hair was as black as the shadows of night,
And hung o’er the scars left by many a fight,
And his voice like the thunder was deep, sthrong, and loud,
And his eye like the lightning from under the cloud.’

‘There, what do you think of that?’

‘You were not made for singing, O'Brien. For mercy's sake be quiet, or you will frighten the very wolves.’

‘Ah, easy to see where the shoe pinches. You like to have it all your own way. What a mean passion, after all, jealousy is! Thank God! I am incapable of it.’

‘I wish you were capable of going to sleep quietly. You must be tired, surely?’

‘I am dead with fatigue—fairly murdered with it—but you have no heart, only a lump of lead in your breast, and so I have the pleasure to bid you good-night; “and if for ever, then for evermore, good-night.”’

CHAPTER XVII.

PABLO RANCHE.

'Here, in a safe though small retreat,
Content and love have fixed their seat :
Love, that counts his duty pleasure,
Content, that knows and hugs his treasure.'

NEXT day they drove into a narrow valley. The sun was sinking, and his declining rays flushed with the roseate glow of sunset the snow-clad hills, and touched with red light the stems of the tall pines, and lingered lovingly on a rough brown wooden building, with quaint eaves and narrow projecting dormer-windows, that stood close by the forest. Behind it great stacks of wood were piled, and before the door flocks of poultry chucked and crowed, waiting for their evening meal, while cows lowed from a low outhouse half sunk in the drifted snow. It was a rough place enough, but it was so home-like, so comfortable, that a look of surprise and gladness flashed into Frank's eyes.

'I had no idea,' he said, 'that any amount of labour could make such a nice place of any bit of land out here.'

'Then you were wrong ; good hard work, and plenty of it, can do anything. Yes, it is a highly refreshing sight ; and, what's more, it is suggestive of better feeding a good deal than we have had of late. Ah, there's Winny. I wonder where Nell is ?—milking the cows, probably.'

'Oh, that is Winny, is it ? Why did you not tell me there were young ladies here ?'

'Because I never think of such things. I am not a ladies' man ; I never had a word to say to a lady in my life, and never expect to have ; but I know that young individual when I see her, and that is Winny.'

Yes, that was Winny. And Winny Taylor, as they saw her in the fading light of the winter afternoon, was a straight, handsome, well-built girl of twenty or thereabouts, with a clear healthy complexion, regular intelligent features, and fine well-opened hazel eyes, which had, Frank thought, in their clear depths, a very winning frankness and directness about them. Coming up, she welcomed O'Brien after a simple unembarrassed fashion, and was introduced to Frank, and shook hands with him, and heard all about O'Brien's accident, and was sorry and sympathetic, and then glad that her father was at home.

He did not appear, however, but another girl did, who seemed to Frank an exact copy, a living counterpart of Miss Winny, her twin sister, Nell. O'Brien greeted her also, but after a more constrained and reserved fashion; and, finally, an old Indian woman, who rejoiced in the appellation of Marm Nassick, tumbled out of the byre, and by the united exertions of all three, aided by Frank, O'Brien was unstrapped from the rude sledge and carried into the house.

The room into which they were ushered was a very homely one, but in its air of neat comfort it seemed to Frank simply charming. Food was on the table, hominy cakes, eggs, milk, cream, and fried ham, luxuries which made O'Brien's mouth water, and at the table, enjoying his evening meal in solitary dignity, sat the master of the household, commonly known as Old Ike Taylor.

He was a short elderly man, with a rugged wrinkled face, in whose time-worn features it was difficult to trace any resemblance to his handsome daughters. A hard sparing man in all things, he was sparing also of speech, and when he used words he preferred monosyllables.

'Good evening,' said O'Brien, blandly, as he was carried in.

'Evenin', stranger,' said Old Ike, without rising, and helping himself to a huge mouthful of ham.

'A long winter it has been,' continued O'Brien, jauntily, 'I wonder if it ever means to come to an end?'

'Kalkilate it will,' replied Mr. Taylor thickly, through his ham and egg.

'You are rather a dab at bone-setting, aren't you now, Mr. Taylor?' proceeded O'Brien, in an insinuating tone.

'Reckon I can fix them somehow, stranger,' said Old Ike, washing down the ham and buckwheat cakes with a copious libation of tea.

'So I have heard,' continued O'Brien; 'and having had the misfortune to meet with an accident, I have come to bespeak your skill on my own account.'

'Wall,' and Mr. Isaac munched on, keeping his steady, contemplative eye all the time on his would-be patient.

'I assure you,' continued O'Brien, 'I have heard your skill very much praised.'

'Do you say so now, stranger?'

'Yes, indeed; you are worth a whole regiment of regular saw-bones, I am told.'

'Of coorse, of coorse.'

'You have got the knack of it, somehow.'

'And they ain't, I suppose?'

'My dear sir, pray do be serious with me. I have suffered dreadfully, and, to put it mildly, I am in torture still.'

'Who's a jokin', stranger? I kalkilate I ain't; and this here gent ain't struck the trail of a laugh yet.'

'Will you answer a plain question, Mr. Taylor?'

'That depends on a power o' things.'

'Will you set my leg or not?'

For a minute Old Ike looked as stolid and wooden as usual, then a ray of fun scintillated for a moment in the corner of his eye. 'Look yar, stranger, you can count on me pretty much, I reckon. Let's have a look at it.'

And with that he rose, and going to a shelf, brought down a bottle, and setting to work in good earnest, soon had the unfortunate ankle-bone, comparatively speaking, all right.

By-and-by they sat down to supper, old Ike retiring to a seat in the chimney-corner, where Marm Nassick settled down also to husk Indian corn, in the red after glow of the wood-fire, and Winnie and Nell kept flitting about in a distracting fashion, on pretence of seeing if all the table fixings were straight.

Table fixings, indeed ! As if any one had leisure to think of them, or for the matter of that, of the supper itself, and yet the supper was a success. O'Brien was quite ready to own that even from a gastronomic point of view it was a meal worth living for. As for Frank, he did not know what he was eating ; his eyes from time to time would go wandering round the room, till they rested on Winnie's face, and lithe handsome figure, and there they remained, fascinated by an attractive power which he had no strength to withstand, but which began to puzzle him horribly. What could it be ? He was as little as O'Brien a lady's-man ; it must be, he settled at last the incongruity between these girls and their surroundings. Gems of purest ray serene, they were here in a setting so rough and uncouth, that the contrast enhanced their charms immeasurably. Yes, of course, it must be that, only his glances seldom wandered in the direction of Nell, or, if they did, it was only to return to her sister's face, and lose themselves in the limpid depths of her clear soft serious eyes.

From all this, it may be gathered that Master Frank was not a very interesting companion, and as O'Brien was both hungry and thirsty, there was for some time very little conversation, until, his creature wants being appeased, he began to talk after his usual cool and entertaining fashion.

Supper over, they all drew in round the fire, and Frank, feeling himself impelled, by a mysterious attraction which he could neither resist nor define, seated himself beside Winny, and was then amazed and stultified by his own presumption. A minute before he had felt as if he had at his command any amount of easy fluent small talk, and had

rather plumed himself on making O'Brien stare, and now, hey presto! he no sooner wanted it than it was gone. He cudgelled his brains in vain—he could bring out nothing more *recherché* than the bald: 'What grand weather we have had of late!'

'Do you think so?' she remarked, in some surprise. 'It has been unusually cold and severe with us.'

'Cold, oh, frightful! Siberia is nothing to it. Cold, yes, I should think so, frightfully frigid.'

'Yes, it must be cold, I should fancy, up in the mountains.'

'It is atrociously cold. Have you ever been at the North Pole?—I suppose not!'

The sweet intent eyes opened a little. 'No, have you?'

'Yes—no—that is, I can imagine it, though.'

'Ah, indeed!'

'Yes, and Cedar Creek seems to me very much what it must be there.'

'Really.'

'Yes, I assure you, particularly in a snow-storm—don't you think so?'

'I can't tell, I never thought of it at all.'

'No. Ah, no, I should think not!' he continued desperately. Old Ike was asleep, O'Brien had complained of heat, and the settle on which he lay had been moved to the other end of the room, and Nell sat beside it, and for all he knew old Marm Nassick too. To all intents and purposes they were alone; he wanted to say something graceful, something complimentary, and in the very nick of time, a great idea struck him. 'But this—this,' he went on with a good deal of stammering, 'is not Siberia.'

'I should hope not.'

'No—really. No—ah, no—it is—it is a paradise!'

'Did you ever see one?' she inquired innocently.

'No; that is, not really, you know, but I can imagine one.'

'It is not much like what I should imagine paradise to be,' she continued.

‘Well, it is not, perhaps, after all.’

‘But didn’t you say just now you thought it was.’

‘Did I. Oh, then I must have been wrong, and yet, looking at it philosophically, I was right, and yet I—I—I—have no doubt I was wrong!’ He was floundering horribly again, talking the silliest of silly nonsense; and here was she looking serious and surprised, but as cool as a cucumber, and with a ray of her father’s fun just flecking the corners of those lovely eyes. That settled him; he felt his self-possession oozing away. In vain he tried to rally himself—he could think of nothing fresh to speak of; and yet she looked as if she expected him to say something. For a moment he felt inclined to run away, but O’Brien would laugh, and then, where could he run to? Grand as the weather was, a night out in the forest without wraps, and with the thermometer thirty degrees below zero, might have serious consequences, so he sat and frowned savagely at the fire. Why would ideas not come to him? why was there this poverty of conversational powers? Alas! the more incensed he became at himself, the more obstinately one-ideal he grew. There was absolutely no help for it but to try the old subject again.

‘As I was saying,’ he began, ‘analogically there is a resemblance, I think—not physically, I mean, but personally; no, I am all wrong—mentally, I should have said, to Paradise. No, analytically, metaphysically, I mean.’

She laughed outright, and then gave him a rapid deprecating glance, as if she were speculating as to his perfect sanity or not. It was the sweetest, most musical laugh in the world, hers, but it extinguished him; and then, just as he was feeling what a blessed thing it would be if the floor would open and swallow him up and cover his stupidity out of sight, old Ike opportunely awoke, and blurted out:

‘Winnie, old gal, give us a song.’

Winnie rose, and took down from a shelf behind her father’s chair—of all things in the world—a guitar.

‘What shall I sing, father?’ she asked. ‘Shall the song be merry or sad to-night?’

‘Sad, child; don’t you hear how the wind is howling in the tops of the fir-trees; sing me one of your mother’s songs.’

This was the longest speech he had yet made, and he spoke it with a pure English accent, which Frank might have observed, if he was capable of noticing anything, which he was not. Instead of brightening up, he became, if possible, still more absorbed and distrait; for Winnie sang, and sang very well, too. She had a clear, sweet voice, and what it lacked in training was made up in expression. For the next hour he was in Elysium—in the seventh heaven of enjoyment; but it came to an end, as all things worth living for do, and he only became fairly conscious it was over when he heard O’Brien say:

‘Now then, old fellow, are you going to answer me or not? Upon my word, your coolness is something monstrous. You don’t even seem aware that this is the ninth or tenth time I have addressed the same remark to you.’

‘I beg your pardon; what is it you are saying?’

‘I like that now—you are a nice fellow, you are; but I am a patient, long-suffering man, so I don’t mind repeating for the eleventh time what I was saying. Don’t you think that these two girls are inconveniently and intolerably like each other?’

‘I don’t think there is any unusual resemblance,’ responded Frank, grimly.

He had just begun to chew the sweet cud of memory—to pass in review the events of this wonderful evening, and, as may be anticipated, he found O’Brien and his small-talk something of a nuisance. O’Brien, on his part, placidly unconscious of his varying moods, had something to say, and meant to say it, in spite of frowns and monosyllabic answers.

‘Ah! I see; we are too nonchalant to take any interest in

the matter ; and yet, let me tell you, Master Frank, that these are pretty girls, and good girls, and well-educated girls, too.'

'Upon my word, O'Brien, this is too intolerable ; did I ever say they were not ?'

'You said much the same thing when you declared not a minute ago that you saw no likeness between them.'

'Well, then, I don't.'

'You could not make a mistake between them, I suppose ?'

'Bless my life, who could, that had eyes in their head ?'

'That won't wash at all, Blake. It won't, you know.'

'Is there any reason why it should ?' growled Frank.

'Well, it does not signify. You don't see any likeness between these two girls, and you could not make a mistake between them. Very good ; I will take down your conceit a peg or two on that score before I have done with you, yet.'

'I really wish you would let a fellow alone. What on earth are you bothering about ?'

'You heard what I said, I think ?'

'I don't know—I'm not sure ; I only know one thing—I am very sleepy.'

'Precisely. Yes. Well, I will pay you out for this, see if I don't.'

'What a persistent beggar you are ; but I protest I won't be drawn, not to-night. So do what you like, and leave me to go to sleep.'

'All right, but I'll take it out of you, I will. What ! not even listen to me, when you know very well indeed that I am entitled to a respectful hearing on most subjects. It don't matter at all. Oh, not in the least ; but I will make it straight, or my name is not Denis O'Brien.'

That was O'Brien's last good-night, and he was apt to be a man of his word, but Frank did not give his absurd threat so much as a thought. Set free from the vague irritation of having to answer his remarks, he relapsed into a brown-

study, silently chewing the cud of sweet memories. There she was, sitting opposite to him, with her serene radiant eyes. Again he revelled in those sweet, serious, furtive glances ; again he heard her low, silvery laugh, and floated away into dreamland on the spell of her sweet song.

The next day he spent at the Rancho of Los Pablos. That was necessary to recruit a little after the fatigue of the journey, and then—what would come next ? The master of the mansion insisted on O'Brien's remaining where he was until the bone had knit—he could not answer for the consequences if he were removed. And O'Brien answered, in his cool insouciant way :

Well, he did not mind if he did stay—one must obey one's doctor, he supposed.

Very good. What had that fellow done that fortune should thus shower down her favours upon his insensible head ?

'And you, Mr. Blake, won't you stay to look after your friend ?'

It was Winnie who spoke, in a kind, unconscious, calm voice, which yet made the blood ebb with an alarming suddenness from poor Frank's heart, and throb into his temples, and tingle all over him from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet. It was a sensation not so absolutely blissful as it was uncommonly uncomfortable. And what was worse, it absolutely deprived him of the power of speech, and left him staring in dumb stupidity like a downright ninny. He was just coming to himself a little bit, when O'Brien—the forward, selfish beast—took the word out of his mouth, and made answer thus on his behalf :

'Thanks, Miss Winnie, you are more than kind ; but this poor dear Frank of ours is a great stickler for duty, and duty calls him to Cedar Creek and his interesting charge, Pompey, who, I make little doubt, is as mad as a March hare by this time. If anything does not agree with that nigger it is solitude, that's a fact.'

Frank glared round upon him very red in the face, but speechless still, the most frantic rage being now superadded to his other bewildering emotions.

‘Winnie! Winnie!’ cried Nell, from some inner region, and off bounded Winnie.

‘I say, old fellow, I have got you out of that scrape nicely, haven’t I?’

Then the storm broke out.

‘It is quite inconceivable, I think, O’Brien, that you should go on in this way treating me like a child.’

‘Hilloa! what are you so savage about? What have I done?’

‘What have you done? Why can’t you leave me to answer for myself?’

‘Well, man, don’t snap a fellow’s nose off for trying to help you. You are so uncommonly crusty this morning that I don’t know what to make of you. I never saw you in such a temper before. Seriously, old man, you know as well as I do that you cannot take up your abode here.’

‘Who said I wanted to take up my abode here?’

‘You look as if you wanted to,’—with a grin.

‘And I suppose you don’t, eh?’ fixing him with a stern eye.

‘Oh, that’s different. I am an invalid, you know; and I don’t mind confessing to you, that this leg of mine has let me into a good thing of it. Old Ike is a brick, and they are such jolly, pretty, natural girls; but, I beg your pardon, you are not a ladies’ man, Blake, and your heart, I see, is with Pompey.’

‘As how am I not a ladies’ man?’ inquired Frank, full of rising anger.

‘Oh, I don’t know. Don’t let us quarrel—it’s too cold for that. And as you are in such a savage unchristian mood, my dear fellow, the best thing, I think, you can do, is to make tracks for Cedar Creek without delay.’

‘Thank you for nothing,’ said Frank; but he had to go

all the same, only he took some comfort with him. Those gentle eyes of Winnie's mutely but eloquently assured him he should be missed ; and when old Ike said, in his rough, hearty way, 'Look yar, stranger, you'll come back as soon and as often as you like, and see how your friend is getting on,' those eyes—those lovely eyes—re-echoed and clinched the invitation, and then were hurriedly averted with a charming blush.

Until then he had not conceived that anything in the world could be so beautiful, and he was just about to make a fitting response, which might have surprised old Ike considerably, when the words were frozen on his lips and he was again rendered speechless by a familiar voice, which roared out, with an affectation of rough heartiness which was perfectly abominable :

'I beg and pray he will do nothing of the sort—ride eighty miles to see me ! I could not think of it for a minute.'

That was the O'Brien's parting farewell. Was it a whoop of the old war cry of the race, who could tell ? Selfish beast ! He was surprised that he had ever found him endurable. He even began to wonder if it were not possible that the quality of mercy had been strained very unjustifiably indeed, when it prompted him to save from a certain hideous pit in the wilderness that intolerably conceited individual. But all his reflections were not tinged by the same spirit of savagery ; some of them were so ecstatic and heavenly, that they had power even to tinge with their own *couleur de rose* the sad wintry landscape. Never had he seen the skies overhead so peacefully, serenely blue. The sun shone for him with a new-brightness—the air was sweet with the resinous scents of the pine woods. From the thickets he heard the first low notes of the bob-a-link, sweet in their promise of coming spring. All nature around him rejoiced, and he rejoiced with it—his heart within him was lightsome and glad ; he sang as he rode along through

the wintry waste, and when his songs were all finished (he had not a very extensive *repertoire*) he shouted, and, in short, behaved in many ways so like a maniac, that he began to have doubts either that he was really mad, or in the fair way of becoming so soon.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HOPE.

'In hope a king doth go to war,
In hope a lover lives full long,
In hope a merchant sails full far,
In hope just men do suffer wrong.
In hope the ploughman sows his seed,
Thus hope helps thousands at their need.
Then faint not heart among the rest,
Whatever chance, hope thou the best.'

CEDAR CREEK once more—and Pompey, black as Erebus, agrinning at the door; but oh, how changed they both seemed! There was a revolting roughness about the whole place, and poor Pompey's quaint interjections of welcome and open-mouthed grinning delight seemed not so much affecting as inexpressibly prosaic and vulgar.

'Welcome, Massa Frank! You is here again—"here at last."'

'Yes,' was the monosyllabic response, and massa, as he hurriedly disrobed himself of his travelling gear, sent glances by no means approving round the mansion.

'Oh, massa! me hab wearied so. Me tink you nebber come back to dis poor shild.'

'Well, here I am. What then?'

'Me get supper,' said the practical and unconscious Pompey. 'If me had known all for sertain dat massa

come to-night, me hab one roast of porcupine, or one stewed turkey, or something nice, now me hab nuffing but de pemmican.'

'Well, let us have the pemmican,' cried Massa Frank, chafing inwardly, but not at the supper, only out of humour at having to come back out of dreamland into the tame regions of his ordinary life.

'What hab come to massa?' asked Pompey, regarding him steadily, with a surprised affectionateness in his glance, which was, in the circumstances, not a little provoking.

'What on earth are you staring at me in that way for, you fool?' asked Frank, at last with fresh irritability of manner.

'Me only wondering what hab come to massa,' answered Pompey meekly.

'And what in your wisdom do you think has come to me?' in rather a dangerous voice.

Pompey involuntarily took a step back. 'Me cannot tell, massa; me know only dat massa not like what himself always be. Him not funny,' in a very lugubrious tone; 'him not well-pleased; him kick poor Nero, when him speak to him in him dog-way; him speak to coloured shentleman like Massa O'Brien, not like himself.'

'And what wonder!' roared Miss Winnie's mute adorer, 'when I come back to such a pig-stye of a place! It is abominably dirty, sir—it is insufferably untidy—it is permeated through and through by a disgusting demon of disorder—faugh!'

Pompey gave a violent start, and rolled his large eyes round in his head, as if in violent convulsions. It was dirty—yes, a little; it was untidy, undeniably, not a little. A strong emotion of penitence shook the simple patient soul, and he sought to atone for sins of omission of which he had but just become conscious, and attempted at the same time to recover favour, by many little obsequious services. In vain—Massa Frank, was not so to be appeased; he sat at

supper with a face of Draconian severity, and as soon as he had swallowed it, tumbled into bed without another word, good or bad, leaving Pompey to sing his hymns alone beside the fire. This he did in a voice so lugubrious, that a pang of remorse did at last begin to shoot through his master's hardened breast; but although he heard Pompey, when his hymns were finished, sorrowfully communing with himself as to the cause of his altered conduct, he offered no apology for his vile temper, but fell asleep in the same unchristian mood of mind, and dreamt—oh, what a dream! He was alone with Winnie in a beautiful garden, and she offered him a flower, a rose—and he had just held out his hand to take it, when rose-garden and Winnie all vanished, and he was in a sandy desert, and Old Ike, astride upon a dense dust-storm, bore down upon him like a whirlwind, shouting in his harshest and most strident tones: 'Look yar, stranger, drop that, now do,' and he awoke. Certainly, he was in the centre of a dust storm, but it was not the Sahara that stretched around him—it was the familiar living-room at Cedar Creek, with Pompey on his knees, a tin plate in one hand and a huge besom of pine boughs in the other, diligently bringing up his neglected housewifely duties, gaping and gasping and sputtering the while, as the whirlwind of his own raising, meeting him right in the teeth, almost choked him.

'Hold hard, Pompey, till I get up, and I'll lend you a hand,' shouted his master; 'and in the meantime go and make another besom.'

Quick as thought, Pompey disappeared, and soon returned with another brush, and they had a regular spring-cleaning then and there, with the result of making the hut more tidy and comfortable, but, as Frank sorrowfully felt, as rough and unhomelike as before. However, he manfully banished these depressing thoughts, and made his usual round, and set his traps and encountered no wolverine, and was as kind as usual to Pompey; but he no longer felt the same interest

in him or his old pursuits. Everything was a weariness to him—everything bored him—he would have liked to have spent the day lounging beside the fire, sunk in blissful day-dreams, but that, he sternly told himself, was impossible. As it was, those dreams went with him through the lonely, silent woods. His thoughts in these reveries always took the same round—they began with her, of course. Out of the dim vistas of the cedar-forest rose that small well-formed head, those sweet intent eyes, that handsome well-built figure, that cheerful girlish laugh; then came Old Ike and Nell, who was considered so like her sister, and of whom he had only the most hazy memories, which somehow always associated her with O'Brien; and lastly, there was O'Brien, himself. And it was curious, even to himself, with what varied emotions he now began to contemplate the idea of his friend. He reflected, seriously, that after all he did not know very much about him. For all he knew he might be an infamous scoundrel—he might even be that most despicable creature in the world, a male flirt, capable of paltering with the truest and freshest affections of the maidenly bosom. His heart swelled within him with vehement indignation at the thought. Then, again, there was the reverse of the medal: O'Brien might be what he had always found him—a gentlemanly, honourable, well-informed, very entertaining individual; but that side of the picture had its disadvantages also. He knew his Shakespeare well, and could recall what a glamour Othello's knack of story-telling threw over poor Desdemona, and he was fain to confess that even Baron Munchausen's adventures were as nothing to O'Brien's, when he was once fairly started. But hang it! what was the use of all this introverted, perplexed, never-ending analysis of character?—whatever he was, he was his friend, and it was curious what an exalted notion he began to have about this time of the requirements of friendship. Damon and Pythias were as nothing to the sacrifices he was ready to make. The one did,

indeed, offer to die for the other, but not to ride eighty miles merely to ask after his health, and yet it was this sublime act of self-devotion which he had already begun to contemplate.

'It is but common civility,' he said to himself; 'nay, more, it is your duty.' Duty! duty! That was the trumpet utterance that called to him, blatant and shrill, across the wastes; and as he never had been a man to shirk its calls, he mounted the best horse of the troop, one fine morning, and set off on his travels again, to Pompey's undisguised dismay.

It was a long ride, and he had plenty of time for going over his familiar mental round, not once, but many times. Then, as one landmark after another on the desolate horizon showed him that he was nearing the end of his pilgrimage, the shrine sacred to friendship—in other words, the *Rancho* of Los Pablos—another most peculiar emotion seized him, or rather, it was a mingling of many emotions. Shame, fear, bashfulness, an indescribable sense of all his shortcomings, mental and physical, overpowered him, till he seemed to have no choice but to turn his horse's head and gallop back to Cedar Creek. So strong was the impulse, that he obeyed it for a couple of miles or more, altogether neglectful of the claims of friendship, and then he brought himself up with 'O'Brien is expecting me—poor O'Brien! Shall he languish in vain for a sight of his friend?' No, perish the thought. He would—he would do it. Ah, but could he? Was he to be a faithful friend, or was he not? In the long run, he ended by being one; but how often he turned and returned, and turned again, had better not be told. It is enough to hint that he had himself distracting doubts about his own sanity—but then everything was distracting. As, blushing and trembling, he at last approached the door, leading the much enduring quadruped on which he had been lately mounted—he literally scarcely knew whether he was walking on his head or on his feet—when,

ha ! what was that ? The tones of O'Brien's voice, jocund and blithe, and the most delicious, rippling gurgle of girlish laughter.

To the anxious heart of friendship it ought to have been a most re-assuring sound, carrying conviction, strong as death, that all with the invalid was progressing well : but this was not the effect it produced.

'Conceited beast !' muttered Mr. Francis Blake ; ' I knew I should find him at his old tricks,' and hitching his bridle to a branch, he strode in.

It was quite a husking bee on a small scale : the two girls and old Marm Nassick were husking corn on the hearth, and O'Brien, cool as a cucumber, and evidently quite at home, was telling one of his wonderful stories ; and there stood the new-comer, with his face burning, his ears on fire, his hands inconceivably in his way, his feet the same—indeed, his whole body ditto ; for if he could have become a spirit in a moment, and so invisible, he would have been profoundly thankful. But no ; there he stood, encased in too solid flesh—big, awkward, sheepish, staring like a gaby gone mad, with an intense soul-mortifying conviction that he had not a word to say for himself.

Winnie was the first to speak.

'So you have found the road back,' she said, with a smile ; 'but, good gracious, what is the matter ? You look dreadful.'

'Hilloa, old fellow !' quoth O'Brien, turning half-round and leisurely scrutinising him. 'Out with it ; what is the matter ? You look unutterable things. Is Cedar Creek burned down, or has something inconceivably horrible befallen that black lamb in the wilderness ?'

'I—I—I,' he faltered, in a thick husky voice, 'I only came to see—to ask—that is, to judge for myself, how you were getting on.'

'“Oh, most lame and impotent conclusion !” Did I ever ask you to ? Did I not say, “Tarry at home, and attend to your duties” ?'

'Mr. Blake is welcome,' said Miss Winnie.

Oh, that kind, quiet manner, those sweet eyes, that gentle smile!—they went straight to his heart; and then she brought him in and set him down beside the fire, and busied herself in getting supper, and O'Brien prosed on with Nell for auditor; and now and then, as she passed him, kind, thoughtful Winnie would say a word or two to him, and he answered he knew not what. Where were his ideas? In vain he ransacked his brain for them. It was a barren waste—a blank—a morass, and he could no more say anything neat or incisive than he could have flown through the air.

In due course Old Ike came in and greeted him gravely, but with something more than his usual furtive ray of humour blinking in his eyes, although, as his manner was, he said nothing until he had worked well through his evening meal; then he took a prolonged stare at Frank, slowly chewing, as he gazed after a ruminating fashion, a huge wedge of corned-beef, and then he finally broke the ice with:

'I guess, stranger, I have fixed you now,' and he nodded and blinked as he spoke, after a fashion which made Frank afraid that he was going to have a fit of apoplexy.

'Fixed me!' he faltered. 'Pardon me, I don't quite understand,' and then, feeling that in one sense he was fixed as a target for all eyes, he became of a fiery red hue again—as scarlet as a lobster; his very ears burned as if scorched by a consuming flame.

'Look yar, stranger, will you answer me on the square a plain question? I saw you this afternoon at your manoeuvres, and I said that man was raised a 'questrian—a what d'ye call it, a circus rider, and he's a'doin' of his old tricks over again.'

'A what?' gasped the unhappy victim, staring stonily at Old Ike.

He was benumbed—petrified; he could say nothing to

deny the charge, which, however, was rebutted by O'Brien, who declared that he knew his history, and a circus rider he had certainly never been.

'What puzzles me is,' he continued, addressing the old man, 'how you ever got to think it?'

'I guess, stranger,' answered Old Ike, still chewing the cud of puzzled reflection, 'that you would have got to think so too, if you had seen the frisky crittur as I did this artemnoon, riding roundabout, and roundabout, and always in a circle, for all the world as if he wor a starrin' it round the ring, or wor a depitation to a lunatic asylum.'

'Come and help me, some one, oh do !' cried Miss Winnie ; 'the red heifer has broken loose.'

Frank glared all round for a moment, breathing hard and short, and then he made a bolt of it and reached the door. They were laughing, such coarse, loud guffaws as almost sickened him ; but what of that ?—she was not laughing—she was her sweet kind gracious self, and for a few blissful minutes he was the happiest fellow in the world.

Of course, the red heifer could not be caught immediately, and before she was caught, he had learned that it was a cherished desire of Miss Winnie's heart to possess a skin of the large grey mountain wolf.

'I will get you one—there are several in the forest near Cedar Creek ; at least, I will do my very best to procure one,' he promised breathlessly.

'Oh, Mr. Blake, will you ? I shall be so glad to get one ; but they are very fierce, are they not?'

'I suppose they are considered so ; but you don't imagine a trapper of my experience cares much about that, do you ? I—I—oh, Miss Winnie, I will do anything to please or serve you ; your slightest wish is more than a law to me.'

'Thank you, you are very kind ; but look, you have let the red heifer away again—that was stupid of you. Quick, quick ; if she once gets away to the forest the coyotes will soon make short work of her.'



‘ I will get you one—there are several in the forest.’

[Page 190.]

This was somewhat of a fall from the seventh heaven of his vaulting hopes, and, considerably abashed, he set out in chase of the red heifer, and, as he was fleet of foot, fairly headed and brought her back and made her fast to her stake in the byre.

‘That was not so badly done,’ said Miss Winnie; ‘you really were smart about that, Mr. Blake,’ and she stooped to pat her bovine favourite. ‘I am sure Red Duchess would thank you if she could.’

‘As your knight errant, Miss Winnie, I am bound not only to bring you the grey wolf’s skin, but to do all manner of good offices for Red Duchess; but before I go on this grey wolf quest, give me, as the ladies of the olden time used to do, some token to revive my drooping courage, and re-animate my sinking heart.’

‘But I am not a lady of the olden time, all glittering with jewels; I have no token to give my knight, if my knight you be—I am only poor Winnie Taylor, of Pablo Rancho;’ but with a saucy laugh, ‘here is this bunch of red berries, just to encourage you,’ and she threw him the berries, and sprang away in the direction of the house.

It was Nell’s very laugh, Nell’s playful manner, Nell’s saucy look. It was the first time that the resemblance between the two girls had impressed him much; but now it appealed to him so forcibly, that it struck him all of a heap, and he stood flustered and gasping, meaning to say something to clinch his fate, and finding no words at all in which to tell the old, old story, that was seething in his brain. When he stole in to the family-room at the Rancho, Winnie, more adroit, had told her story, and done full justice to his gallant capture of the red heifer—a well-intended effort on her part, which had, however, no other effect than that of drawing down upon him, in full swing, the torrent of Old Ike’s badinage. It would be wrong in this most veracious story to say that it did not jar upon him—it did. Sometimes he felt that he was almost too insufferable; but as he

was Winnie's papa, he was anxious, of course, for his good opinion, and bore everything with patience. Had he not in the breast of his leather hunting-shirt that precious bunch of red berries; and did not his heart palpitate furiously beneath them whenever she so much as glanced in his direction; and did not his face burn like a thousand furnaces, and eke his ears withal, when O'Brien stole from time to time queer, furtive, amused looks at him, out of the tail of his eye, while all the time he rattled blithely on, the self-sufficient animal!—as if there were any merit in being able to talk against time, such insufferable nonsense, too, as he was spouting. But even O'Brien's talk came to an end at last, and wearied out with his previous exertions in the way of babbling, he looked, when they were alone together, positively sleepy. That was good, for in his dreamy and abstracted mood, Frank felt that he had no desire for any more small-talk, and seeing that O'Brien sat grave and stolid as an owl, he ventured to take out his little bunch of berries, and fondle it caressingly, when, with a swoop, the enemy was down upon him in a moment. 'Oh, Frank, Frank! what are you up to now? Do you think I don't see through you—you precious ninny.'

'I don't care if you do.'

'You had better confide in me, Francis. I know you are longing to make a confession, and as I am the most unselfish fellow in the world, I am willing to act as your Father Confessor, although, as a rule, there is nothing more tiresome.'

'You will be relieved, then, to hear that I don't mean to put you to the trouble. I have really nothing to confess.'

'Indeed! I thought you were above being a hypocrite; but it don't matter, not in the least—I suppose you won't deny that they are jolly girls—Winnie and Nell?'

'I never did deny that. They are charming.'

'Both equally so?'

'Yes, of course, both equally so.'

‘Then you will be due two grey wolf-skins, and not one—eh, my gay Lothario!’

‘How do you know that?’

‘Ha, my fine fellow, a truce to your questions! I did not say I had any confession to make, did I?’

‘No, you did not; but if you don’t much mind, I would rather like to know how you found out that?’

‘Ah, you don’t deserve it! You have treated me badly, Francis, but I forgive you, for I know what intolerable torture it gives a man like you to lay bare the inmost recesses of your heart, and it’s not necessary either. I know, as well as if I had listened to the most tedious yarn in the world, all that you think, and hope, and feel, and fear. You have my blessing, my boy, and now good-night.’

‘It is uncommonly hard lines to have a fellow like you chaffing me out of pure idleness,’ grumbled Frank.

‘Why, what’s the use of being savage? Grumble away, Master Francis; I see through it, and could read you your fortune as deftly as the Gipsy Queen herself.’

‘If you can, it’s more a great deal than I can do;’ but although he said this, Frank was quite of opinion that he could read his own fortune very prettily, so far. He loved Winnie, he adored her—he had loved her from the moment he had first seen her; and he felt with a swift electric thrill of joyful bliss that she also was beginning to love him. Saddened, but not desponding, he went away next day, resolved that the flower of Pablo Rancho should yet be his own.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE GREY WOLF-SKIN.

'I have no herds, no fleecy care,
No fields that wave with golden grain,
No pastures green or gardens fair,
A woman's venal heart to gain.
Then all in vain my sighs must prove,
For I, alas! have nought but love.'

THE ride home was tedious enough, and Cedar Creek and honest Pompey with his friendly grin, looked, alas! as devoid of all attraction as they had been before. It seemed to Frank as if some moral earthquake or a whole century of years had divided him for ever from the simple prosaic hard-working life of three weeks ago. His life was hard-working still, no doubt, but he no longer accepted its conditions frankly and got a rough enjoyment out of them. He had become fastidious—he had been subjected to an influence seductively attractive, which had not only enthralled him, but had changed his whole world for him.

Meanwhile the unconscious Pompey prattled on *ad nauseam*. The faithful creature asked so little—he was contented with such a mere tithe of interest and attention—that it would have been brutal not to give it to him, and so Frank endured his chatter as best he could, and made pretence to listen, with an occasional nod or so, letting his thoughts drift away the while into a heavenly dreamland with which Pompey had nothing in common; while Pompey's prattle dribbled on and on and on, in the common uninteresting domestic ruts of Cedar Creek, the state of the larder, the success or non-success of the last trapping round, and then——

'Ah, what was that, Pompey?' this was said with decided animation.

'Wurra all dis?—is dat what massa say? 'Top one moment, me tell massa: him 'members him ob Spanker?'

'What, the old grey pony? Yes, I remember him well. A tough, serviceable brute enough, and a good one to go.'

'Ah, massa, him no go any more now; de wolf too many for him; massa no here—him torn in pieces.'

'Never mind, Pompey, I will avenge him to-morrow—a wolf, I think you said? A large mountain wolf, eh?'

'Yes, massa; me see him slinking away between de trees, de big grey tief!'

Next morning Frank set off immediately after breakfast, and plunged into the recesses of the cedar forest, rehearsing, as he trudged along, the exciting drama of the last few weeks. Following Pompey's directions, he soon found the spot where still lay some ghastly relics of the gallant grey. Master wolf, it seemed, had been unable to finish his supper, and Frank, having an inherent conviction that he would return, like a conscientious animal, to devour the fragments that were left, made some small preparations for him after the following fashion; first he made a fire of pine boughs, and in this carefully smoked himself and his gloves; then he took a beaver-trap, which he had brought with him, and fastened it in a run in a thicket near, which bore down directly upon the heap of gnawed bones and morsels of bloody flesh, and made it fast by passing the chain round a tree; he then covered it all up with leaves, and making a round of Pompey's traps, returned after a solitary, but on the whole rather enjoyable day, to the rough good cheer of Cedar Creek and Pompey's beaming welcome.

At times, through the long evening, as he lounged beside the warm fire, no more put out by Pompey's prattle, now that he had got accustomed to it again, than by Nero's undisturbing presence, an unpleasant glimpse of O'Brien would come across his mind's eye, blowing his own trumpet

after his noisy fashion, a veritable autocrat in the little feminine world of Pablo Rancho. There was old Ike, to be sure, to counterbalance his influence, but he was always pottering about out of doors after his herds of horses or flocks of cattle, and so did not count for much. How did O'Brien find out about the grey wolf-skin? Bah! what nonsense was this? Was he going to make himself miserable about a trifle? She might have told Nell, and so the ball might have gone round to him, or the old Indian woman might have been prowling about and overheard what he said, and repeated it. It was all as clear as daylight, or a little clearer, and so he did his duty by Pompey with a tolerably easy mind, and read to him, and made much of him, and went to bed relieved and content.

Next morning he went in quest of the wolf, and found him. A big grey wolf he was; with a large, well-furred pelt, such as made his heart leap within him to behold. When he first caught a glimpse of him, he was lunging and pulling at the chain, and making the most frantic efforts to get away. Finding he could not get loose, and catching sight at the same moment of Frank, whom he justly suspected of being at the root of his misfortunes, he made a savage and determined rush at him, and snapping his teeth with a sharp clack, growled and snarled like a savage watchdog, his green eyes glaring fiercely the while, and the long hair on his neck and shoulders standing out in a bristling mane.

Laying down his rifle, Frank took from his belt a long tomahawk-shaped knife, but the wolf was too sharp for him, dashing himself from side to side, and tearing and biting at everything like a fury, he at length wrenched off the stump of the tree round which the chain was fastened, and set off, hopping away at an astonishing pace on three legs.

Thinking he was going his fastest, Frank muttered, 'I shall have you soon, my fine fellow,' and set off after him

at a sharp run, expecting to come up with him immediately. He was, however, out in his calculations; the wolf, put upon his mettle, suddenly changed his pace into a long swinging canter, and despite trap and chain and Frank's utmost endeavours, kept well in front of him.

For a long half-mile the chase continued; the hunter was panting and blown, the quarry was fresh and strong.

'This will never do,' gasped Master Frank, and he went home for his horse and a mouthful of something to eat. Pompey he did not see, for he was out, as usual, pot hunting. About eleven o'clock he was on the wolf's trail again, following it at a canter; and before going far he came to a place where marks on the snow showed that the creature had sat down. With a trapper's eye he glanced all around, and soon found the spot where the trail recommenced, but one thing puzzled him, the tracks no longer showed the drag of the chain.

How had he got rid of it?—that was the query. Why, in this way, as a little reflection showed him: the wolf is a very sagacious creature, and this unfortunate member of a cute race had wrapped the chain round and round the trap; he also kept to the deepest and lightest snow, so that, while his three feet sank, the one in the trap did not, and the trap, acting as a snow-shoe, enabled him to go on four legs instead of three. The horse had not the same advantage, his feet sank deeply at every step, and the soft snow, balling in his hoofs, obliged him to go slowly.

For some hours Frank thus followed the trail at a disadvantage. Sometimes he caught sight of the wolf, at other times he lost him for long intervals. At last, Master Lupus, finding he was still pursued, suddenly changed his tactics, he abandoned the edge of the broad, level valley, to which he had hitherto kept, and made for a rough rocky cedar-ridge beyond, where it was very difficult to track him. In many places the snow had been blown from the hard naked rock, and it was almost impossible to follow the trail.

Sometimes a wide detour had to be made, and then unexpectedly Frank would strike it again, fresh and clear, on a patch of snow.

So engrossed did he become in this pursuit, which had so many windings and turnings, that he ceased to notice the flight of time. The sun, dipping to the west, sank slowly below the horizon, but the ardour and interest of the chase had been so intensified by the difficulties he had encountered, that he resolved to continue it by moonlight, pressing his horse forward that he might accelerate the fatal moment, and close as soon as possible upon his wearied-out prey.

But the wolf was not yet by any means at the end of his resources ; he again altered his often changed course, and leaving the cedar ridge, made for the large open valley below the creek. Was he going to take cover ? It almost seemed so ; but if he had any such intentions he again changed his mind, his last night's experience in a thicket being, probably, still too fresh in his memory ; for, on emerging from the level valley, Frank was delighted to see him full in view, about a quarter of a mile in front, making for the high precipitous bank of the river.

The horse, who was quite as keen a hunter as his master, no sooner saw him than he laid back his ears, tossed up his head, and dashed away after him at a good pace, whereupon, the wolf, divining that the tug-of-war had come at last, put on a spurt, and suddenly making a leap forward, disappeared over the river bank about fifty yards in front of his pursuer.

In due time, Frank arrived at the spot, which he found to be a sheer even-down precipice of thirty feet or more, matted with a thick growth of brushwood and creepers, which were drifted full of snow. It was impossible to follow the animal down this wild leap ; all that could be done was to make a detour of half-a-mile, and follow a sloping path which led to the bottom of the bank, with the chance of finding him still resting under it from his labours.

Having accomplished this task, Frank rode slowly down the stream, and was soon rewarded by a glimpse of the wolf, who on seeing him uttered a long melancholy howl, and scrambled up the right bank of the river, at a place where it was much too steep even to think of following him.

This was sufficiently provoking, for it led to another long detour, and much loss of time, so that when the trail was again struck after no end of trouble, both the hunter and his horse were getting fagged and worn out. The wolf, on his part, showed signs of equal distress—he often stopped and lay down, but still managed to keep a short distance ahead, until the moon went down and the darkness became so dense that it was quite impossible to track him. It was now about eleven o'clock, a cold night, with a thick damp fog, which seemed to infuse itself into Frank's veins and freeze his very blood. He could scarcely move he was so benumbed with cold, so he dismounted, and gathering a quantity of pine branches, lit a fire, and hung over it until he had thawed a little; then, leading his horse by the bridle-rein, he slowly and cautiously retraced his steps to Cedar Creek.

Hungry and cold, and in the last stage of exhaustion, he with difficulty reached the familiar threshold, with his feet so benumbed that they seemed scarcely so much to belong to himself as to have been changed into lumps of stone.

'Oh, massa! where you hab drop from?' cried Pompey. 'It no good for you to run about dis way all day, and oh, dear, massa! what wrong now? What a white face you was exhibit.'

'I feel as if I were dying by inches, Pompey, but my feet are the worst. They are frozen, I believe.'

'Oh, dat is the worstest of all! Oh, dear! what me do, massa?'

'Take off my foot gear, for I am so far gone that I really cannot do it for myself, and then bring some snow and rub them as hard as you can.'

It was a cruel operation, and extorted many a groan from the luckless sufferer, always sympathetically re-echoed by Pompey, who generally added: 'Ah, massa, is dat bad, werry bad?'

'It hurts horribly, Pompey. Oh! oh! oh!'

'Oh! oh! massa! It hurts me to tink ob dat. How it feel now?'

'As if they were on a red-hot gridiron, Pompey; but it's all the better—it shows there's feeling in them still, and that I won't be a cripple for life. Rub away, my lad; don't spare, never mind how much I groan.'

'Me will rub, massa, till de berry skin come off ob himself.' And he proceeded to rub as if for bare life, till Frank could endure it no longer.

'Oh, murder!' he roared. 'You have scarified them outright at last, Pompey. Stop—stop—and bring a pail of lukewarm water. There, let me put them into it. Now put some stones into the fire, and we will gradually increase the heat of the foot-bath by dropping them into it as they get hot.'

This Pompey managed very adroitly, and the hot bath gradually relieved the pain, so that Frank was able to take his supper in tolerable comfort, and then proceeded to give Pompey an account of the adventures of the day.

'And to tink you lost him after all, massa, dat be de worstest ob it.'

'But I have not lost him, Pompey, I intend to start again in pursuit of him the first thing to-morrow morning, and I flatter myself I will not be very long in finding him, and then, depend upon it, master wolf won't get the best of it.'

'But if your feet freeze again, massa, you won't get de betterest yourself.'

'Don't croak, Pompey, if you love me, as I have some small reason to suppose you do.'

'Massa know best,' said Pompey reflectively; 'but Pompey's head good for someting too. Let dis wolf go,

and den we set traps, catch anoder, catch plenty ; what for massa set him heart upon dis berry one ?

‘To avenge the foul murder of Grey Spanker, Pompey, for one reason—and for another, I have tried for him so often, and have been so often beat, that I feel as if my honour were engaged in the struggle ; and now let us say our prayers, and tumble into our beds—I feel more than ready for mine.’

Next morning, he set out again in pursuit of the wolf, taking, by Pompey’s advice, Nero with him.

‘Nero, good dog, massa,’ said Pompey, putting his arms round the neck of his four-footed ally, and bidding him an affectionate good-bye. ‘Him sensible hanimal—him often help Pompey, aye, and fight for him too ; now him fight for massa !’

In a short time, certainly all the quicker for Nero’s help, he again struck the trail, and soon came to the spot where the wolf had rested all night. Here Nero gave a sniff and a whimper and darted off like a rocket. There was no time to lose in nice calculations as to the practicability or otherwise of the route. Frank was on the comb of a steep ridge, thickly clothed with brushwood, an ugly spot enough for a helter-skelter, neck-or-nothing race, but he was in for it, so closing his eyes, he gave his horse the spur, and away they went at headlong speed, emerging from the brush with no greater damage than a severe switching and one or two deep scratches. On reaching the plain, there was the wolf again, galloping over the ground at a good rate, with Nero about a couple of hundred yards behind him. With a conviction of coming triumph, Frank rode up, when the wolf faced about, and turned suddenly to bay. The dog, with a short sharp bark, threw himself upon him with the impetus of a battering ram, and the two rolled over together on the snow. In a moment Nero was up again, and springing at him, caught him by the neck, and tried to shake him, while the wolf, braced up on his outstretched legs, made a desperate

effort to bite him, but could never turn his head sufficiently far round to do so.

At this moment he looked as if some savage demon had entered into him. His long hair, stiff and erected, was all turned the wrong way, his greenish eyes glared like living opals, and shot forth gleams of baleful light—he gnashed his great jaws in unavailing fury, and his teeth clanked together with a sharp vicious snap.

Trembling for Nero's safety, Frank dismounted, which the wolf no sooner perceived than he made a rush at him, but was cleverly caught behind by Nero, and thrown upon his back. Then the dog, changing his tactics, rushed forward, and caught him once more by the throat, and the two rolled over again together on the blood-stained snow.

The savage brute had still, however, strength to shake himself free from his assailant, and then the two, apparently equally exhausted, lay down, as if by mutual consent, for a short rest, lolling out their tongues and panting for breath as they watched each other steadily.

'It is about time, for your sake, Nero, that all this was ended,' thought Frank, taking up his rifle, which he had laid down. He had stretched out his hand as quietly as possible, but the movement, slight as it was, was sufficient to arouse both the combatants, who sprang simultaneously to their feet.

With a glance at his master out of his sagacious brown eyes, and a reassuring wave of his tail, as much as to say, 'Don't be anxious about me; it's something quite in my way, and I know how to do it,' Nero tried a new game. Dodging round his victim with inconceivable swiftness, he made a feint as if going to rush at him, and then sprang back out of his reach, appearing first on one side and then on the other. The wolf, meanwhile, made short rushes and vicious snaps, first to the right and then to the left, but always missed his agile assailant, while the dog often got a bite at his back or hind legs.

After he had thus worried and tired him out for some time, Nero again changed his manœuvres, and making a sudden forward rush, seized him, as at first, on the side of the neck behind the ear. His exhausted enemy could now no longer shake him off—he was too weak for that; and the dog, perceiving his advantage, shook him backwards and forwards till blood began to ooze from his mouth and nostrils, his blazing eyes grew dull, his protruding tongue faded into a dirty greyish white, and with a lurch to one side he fell heavily over dead, and his thick grey pelt was won, and soon stripped from his smoking carcase, which was left to form a meal for some of his grizzly congeners.

CHAPTER XX.

THE WOLF-HUNTED.

‘With their long gallop, which can tire
The hound’s fierce hate, the hunter’s fire,’
BYRON.

THE grey wolf-skin was won, but fortune, which from time immemorial has delighted to thwart the best laid plans of lovers, had a new and special plague in store for him, and this was a thaw; a thaw of a very pronounced and general description, a thaw which appeared when no thaw should have been, a full three weeks before the usual time.

It was insufferable, it was horrible. He had an undefined but not less firm impression that nature, the inflexible, had somehow swerved from her usual rules for the sole purpose of annoying him, and that therefore he did well to be angry, and to show his teeth in return to all and sundry—the all and sundry at Cedar Creek consisting of Pompey and Nero, who prudently kept out of his way as well as they

could ; still, their turn came round oftener than was pleasant, and then they caught it smartly.

‘What do you mean by hallooing in that way to me?’ Massa Frank growled out one morning in querulous tones to his trusty sable retainer, who, intent upon gratifying him with an unexpected piece of news, was sedulously endeavouring to awake him.

‘It freeze again, massa ; it freeze again like one big sheet of ice.’

‘Couldn’t you have told me so before, you stupid wretch?’ was all the thanks poor Pompey got ; but all the same, Massa Frank deigned to get up, pretty fast too, and looked abroad on the wild world of Cedar Creek. There had been a fresh fall of snow, and it lay shroud-like and white on the silent woods—deep, loose snow, through which no horse could find its way. As he gazed, he anathematised it in his heart, and then a sudden thought struck him : the creek, as he called the river upon whose banks their hut was built, ran almost in a straight line to Pablo Rancho, and flowed past it, swollen there into a mighty stream. What was to hinder him from skating down. To halloo for Pompey, to clamour for his breakfast, to shout forth various contradictory orders as to the packing of the precious wolf-skin and a small stock of provisions, was the work of a moment.

Pompey, sorrowful but submissive, evidently thought he was crazed, and looked at him with pity and compassion twinkling in his big round eyes ; but Massa Frank’s heart was steelled by the most selfish of all passions, and he no more regarded him than he did poor Nero, at whom he threw a tin plate, when he was coming up to fawn upon him, a piece of brutality which so affected Pompey that he burst into tears.

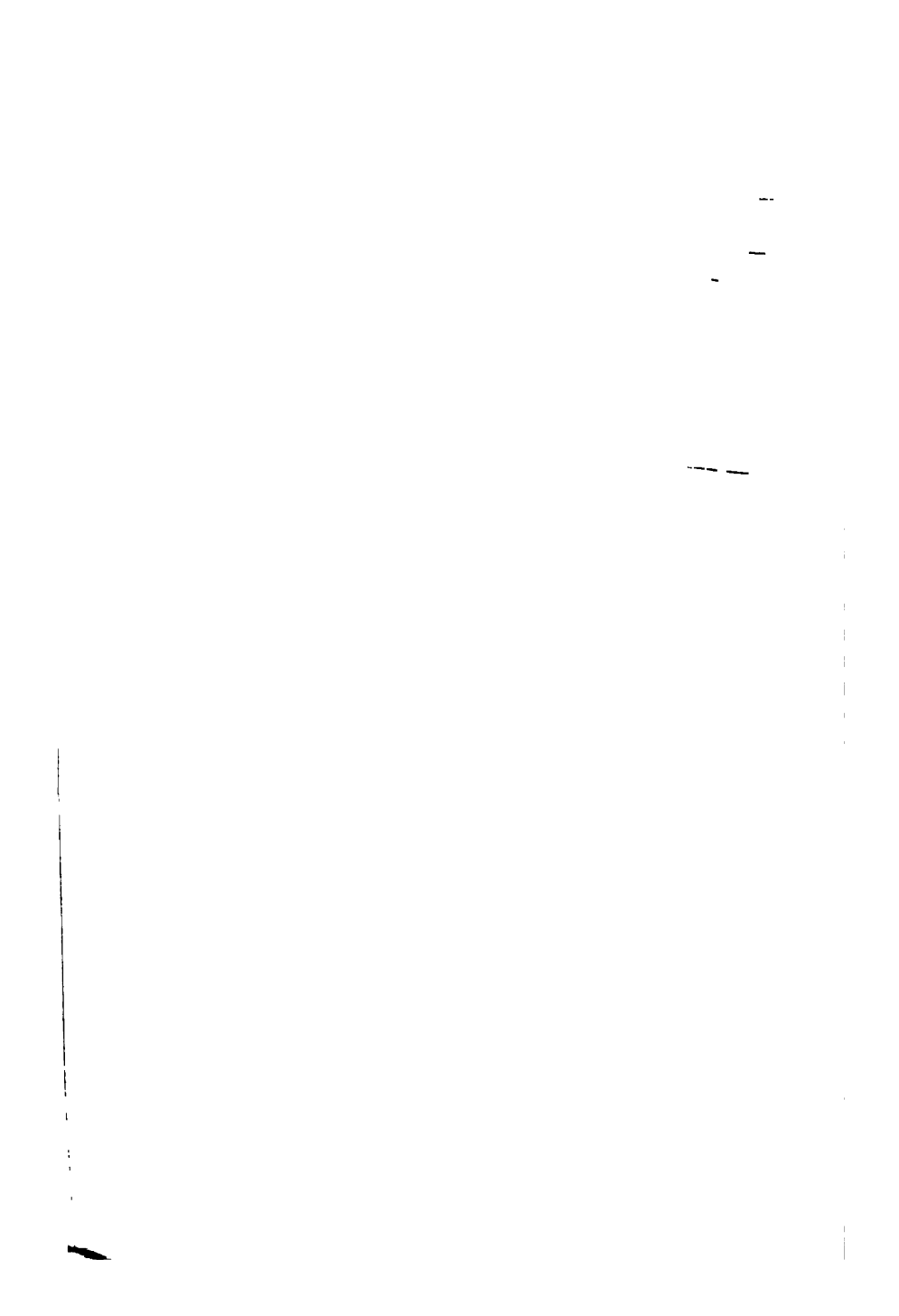
‘What, at it again ! If you don’t keep quiet, you blubbering wretch, at least until I am out of the house, I will shy this other plate at your nose.’

This, it is sad to have to relate, was Massa Frank’s last

good-bye upon this special occasion. It is true that as he skated off his bosom's lord did not sit lightly in his breast ; he felt he had been something of an ungrateful ruffian, but as usual he silenced conscience with thoughts of Winnie.

Her graceful shape, her sweet eyes, her sunny smile, looked out to him from many a forest nook as he glided past. He had not explored much of the creek scenery, and soon passed into a wierd silent world which was altogether new to him. Mile after mile flew past, and then he entered into the gloomiest recesses of the forest, where great pine trees bent their giant boughs over the sullen stream, and feathery pendulous birch-branches swept the frozen depths below, or made a thick arch overhead, shutting out the light of the sombre skies. The ice was smooth as glass, for no ruffling breeze could pierce the forest walls to disturb the serenity of the water, and he promised himself a safe and speedy journey. The feeling of rapid, almost effortless motion was in itself delightful, and he enjoyed it with the glee of a schoolboy out for a holiday. Bend after bend of the river sped past ; it became wider, the wood receded, the prospect grew more open, the sun shone brightly out, and then, dipping towards the west, warned him, to his intense surprise, that the hour of sunset was approaching. Pausing, he sat down on a frozen snag of wood to take a little food, and as he did so, he could not help admiring the picturesque scenery of the river there, as it was at once warmed and softened by the rich subdued light of the setting sun, which lingered with roseate glow on the snowy wastes, as if loath to leave them to darkness and frost.

A brief rest sufficed him, and as the moon was at its full, he resolved to skate all night ; thus would he reach the sooner the goal of his hopes. Refreshed and strengthened, he was soon again flying onwards, too absorbed in his own thoughts to be at first conscious that there was something almost horrible in the intense solitude around him ; but as night deepened, he began to be aware of a curious shrinking



another to his attention, also that this wolf, if an affectionate and dutiful member of the lupine brotherhood, as no doubt it was, might well be supposed to be actuated by the desire of blood-revenge, and if so, then where was he to find his city of refuge? In present flight; fear answered that question, and, moreover, lent him wings. The race before him was arduous, and he strained every muscle and sinew to the uttermost, for the prize before him was life, and all it might yet bring him.

In silence he sped past stretches of forest, acres of dead stumps, miles of fallen timber; no sound broke the dead silence of the mighty woods save the occasional grating whirr of his skates.

His ears, strained to their utmost tension, listened anxiously for the least sound which might denote the neighbourhood of his dreaded foe, but nothing indicated the near proximity of animal life; the only sound he heard was the impetuous throbbing of his beating heart as it palpitated against his breast—the rate at which he was going, and the pucker he was in, both combining to make his blood course at far more than express speed through his veins.

Hitherto he had fought his terrible battle for life bravely, but with the mingled feelings of a man who feels that he is struggling against heavy odds. Now, however, despair began to give place to hope; a little farther down, the river widened out till it became almost a lake-like expanse of water, and if he could but gain that wider level, he felt that he would be comparatively safe, for he might at least pursue his journey free from the risk of a surprise.

He was within a few hundred yards of this broad reach, when he heard distinctly on both sides of him a succession of choking, gasping respirations, such as he had often heard at home from a pack of blown fox-hounds, and a suggestive cracking and snapping of the dry sapless branches, as if several large animals were forcing their way through the underwood.

Hitherto he had distanced them, not by speed of foot, for the idea that a man even on skates could outrun a pack of these wolves was not to be entertained even for a moment, but his road had been clear, and they had had to force their way through many obstacles. Why they did not venture on the ice he could not conceive, perhaps they had an insuperable objection to it, or perhaps, when they had once fairly passed him, they meant to spring upon him from some convenient bend of the stream, or head him off at their leisure. He felt the blood in his veins curdle with horror at the thought, but the terror he experienced, far from paralysing him, only incited him to fresh exertions. A few more yards would bring him to the open ; but could he manage to make them ? It was doubtful, for at that moment there burst upon his appalled ears, not one, but a whole chorus of deep, long drawn, inexpressibly vindictive howls.

Involuntarily he made a short pause, and then sped on again with a tenfold greater impetus. These dread notes of warning, acting like a spur in the sides of a jaded horse, incited him to one more last supreme mighty effort. It was successful, and he glided out from between the walls of forest on to the broad fair bosom of the open stream.

For one short blissful minute he imagined himself safe, and courage and strength returned to him ; the next, the whole pack, with a combined yell resembling that of a legion of furies, discarded their former scruples and took to the ice, and the fearful race again began, more desperately than before.

He had some slight advantage to start with, but before they had gone half-a-mile, he felt, with emotions which were altogether indescribable, that they were gaining upon him ; still he kept on straining every nerve and sinew, but in vain. In a few minutes he felt them close behind him—a few more strides and the foremost of the band of grey-coated fiends would rush on him and pull him down. Nearer and nearer sounded the dull thud of their heavy paws, louder and louder

grew the gasping pants of their laboured hurried breathing ; he almost imagined he could feel their hot breath on his neck behind, and their great teeth lacerating his quivering flesh.

‘I am lost, irretrievably, hopelessly lost,’ he thought, and then a ray of hope born of despair scintillated like a flash of lightning across his brain. He had seen dogs running on the ice overshoot their mark, and fall or slip if brought to a sudden check. The impetus of these animals, so much larger and heavier, must be proportionably greater ; if he made an abrupt and sudden turn he might escape them, at least for awhile. He dared not look behind—instinct told him that but a few inches from him the foremost foe glared eager-eyed and open-mouthed ; but he made a sudden turn to the right, and had the satisfaction to hear the pack rush on, sliding and falling, and snapping and growling, and tumbling over each other in their endeavours to stop. Skating back at a moderate pace, he gradually was regaining both strength and wind, and was congratulating himself upon the success of his manœuvre, when a succession of short baffled bloodthirsty howls warned him that his vindictive foes were again hurrying up in his rear.

Panting, snarling, growling—for disappointment seemed to have made them tenfold more eager—they were once more so close upon him that they had almost closed their fangs in his flesh, when, with the skill of a clown in the pantomime, he again performed the same trick, and gave them palpable evidence that more than one slip may occur between the cup and the lips that are thirsting to drain it.

Again and again through the long hours of that seemingly unending night he had to perform the same ruse, fortunately always with the same results, and then at last morning broke. How he blessed its feeble rays when they first began to gild the tops of the tall cedars ! He was well-nigh exhausted, but he gathered fresh strength with the returning light, the more so that the adversary, halting at the sight, uttered a succession of dismal howls, as if the cold night and rapid exercise had

affected their bronchial tubes most unfavourably. They then slowly, one by one, like beaten dogs with their tails between their legs, crossed the river, and disappeared, weary and supperless, into a dense hemlock swamp; while Frank, feeling that he could not possibly have a narrower escape from a horrible death, felt his whole soul expand in heart-felt gratitude to God.

Skating on for a few miles farther, he stopped to take a little breakfast. The new day seemed to him inexpressibly fresh and beautiful: the softness of coming spring was in the air, and its glad *Te-Deums* in the song of the little cedar-bird that warbled to him from the top of the tall fir-tree beneath which he sat. For a few minutes he rested, and then rose to resume his journey before the thaw, already begun, rendered it impracticable. As yet the ice was safe enough, and he lost no time in getting under weigh, and was soon spinning merrily along, and in a short time, the more to encourage him, familiar objects came in view. Yonder was the mill and the end of the cattle-shed, and on a height above, in the forest, a rude fortress with a deep ditch and stockade all round, which old Ike had improvised against the Indian surprise which was the favourite bug-bear of his life. In a short time, say half an hour, he should be there. Unconsciously he slackened his pace, all the old mingled emotions, doubt, fear, and above all an indescribable and overpowering bashfulness, seized and well-nigh overmastered him. 'Courage!' he said to himself; but the mere repetition of the word brought surprisingly little of the feeling along with it.

Then he took another cue.

'Of what are you afraid, you fool?' he said to himself severely.

'Well, because you are such a big clumsy oaf of a fellow, and she is—oh, she is an angel!'—this was the perfectly sincere but uncomplimentary reply which his heart made to him.

'You are making an ass of yourself, do you know?'

'Well, perhaps I am.'

'And all for nothing, you born idiot!'

'Indeed, it is most likely!'

'But you have got the grey wolf-skin, you ninny!'

'Yes, I have got the grey wolf-skin.'

'Do you suppose for a moment that she will care for such a trifle?'

'Perhaps not; but she asked for it.'

'Ah, if I were you, I would not build too much upon that.'

'I must, for I love her. She is all the world to me—I adore her!—she has transformed my whole life for me, as if by some magic spell.'

'Has she transformed her father? There is something indomitably prosaic about Old Ike.'

'He is honest and straightforward, at least.'

'And likes a bit of quiet fun. What will he say when he sees you back so soon?'

'Why, what should he say?—the visit is perfectly *en règle*. I come, of course, to ask how O'Brien is getting on.'

'Ah, he could almost walk the last time you were there. Have you any reason to apprehend a relapse?'

'None; eh, that is, how can a fellow be sure? I wish you would be quiet. Do you think I have nothing better to do than answer these silly questions? I am going to see how O'Brien is—how O'Brien is, I tell you. If he is better, it is full time that he were going back to Cedar Creek and his duties there.'

'Well, should you not stop here, if you mean to go to Pablo Rancho?'

'Yes—but—oh—ah! The afternoon is fine—I think I shall skate a mile or two further down.'

'Not had exercise enough, perhaps? Is it conceivable that you should be such a fool?'

'I don't know; it seems so, for here I am, and very foolish and uncomfortable I feel, skating on and on, as if spell were laid upon me to skate thus on and on to all eternity. But I must go back; I must present the wolf-skin won with

such difficulty to the secret divinity of my heart. The sun is dipping down towards the west—it will soon be dark, and my friends the wolves, skulking in the cedar thickets, will begin to show themselves again. I really must put an end to this imbecile poltroonery, and turn back. I will go this moment.'

But he went not, and would no doubt have been skating on until now, had not a gruff voice hailed him with :

'Darn me, stranger, if there ain't something queer about you. Here are you skating on as if you did not see that big black hole in front of you ; better draw up, for I can't pull you out.'

It was Old Ike who spoke ; but although extremely surprised at seeing him, and eke the hole withal, of whose existence he had been profoundly unconscious, Frank managed to take his hint, and to answer, with an air of unconcern, that he had just come down to look up his friend, and finding the afternoon and the exercise alike pleasant, had been tempted to prolong his journey a little.

'Ah ! you are a one now, ain't you ? Come all the way from Cedar Creek on a pair o' skates, and then come up this bit arter, jest for the pleasure o' the thing ; but it's your own consarn, I reckon.'

'Of course,' said Frank, with a burning face ; 'and how are the young ladies ?'

'Don't know any young ladies : the gals, if you mean them, is peckish, thanking you graciously all the same.'

Then a Sheridan pause ensued. What did this mean ? He was getting worse and worse. He could no more find words now with her father than with her. Why could he not talk like other people ? What was this dumb devil that had taken possession of him ? Oh ! if Old Ike would only start a subject. But he did not, he trudged on in silence ; and at last, after much weary exercise of his brain, which seemed to have lost all creative and suggestive power, Frank came out with :

'And how are you yourself, sir ?

'I am all here.'

'So I see.'

'Just so.'

This was encouraging, especially as it was followed by a long interval of silence, broken this time by Old Ike.

'I say, stranger, what have you got on your back ?

'Oh, nothing—a mere trifle !

'Guess it's a darned heavy trifle ; ain't it now ?

'Oh, not at all !—light as a feather, a mere bagatelle ; but with your leave I will just lay it down here,' artfully depositing it in the trunk of a hollow tree in a romantic dell, about a quarter of a mile from the house.

'Ah !' said Old Ike, chuckling in his wooden way ; 'so it's a secret, I reckon. Darned if I wouldn't have guessed it to be a grey wolf-skin ; nothin' else, more nor less, stranger.'

'Well, it is a grey wolf-skin,' said Frank confidently.

'Guessed as much, and it's a good un too ; you would have a darned ugly muss afore you got a hold of it, I reckon. And now, stranger, will you trade ?

Barter the wolf-skin ? The precious wolf-skin, hallowed and set apart to the secret empress of his soul ! The awful absurdity, the gross profanation of the idea, absolutely took his breath away, and so stultified him that he could not speak, only gasp with horror.

'I said, would you trade, stranger ?' repeated Old Ike, in a tone so unmistakably crusty that it recalled him to himself.

In many respects Old Ike was extremely objectionable, but still it was necessary to get on with him, and so he made haste to apologise and explain, and re-explain, until he had made his confused explanation a thousand-fold more confounded ; and while he was still explaining, they arrived at Pablo Rancho, and but for the afflictive bashfulness which made his cheeks burn and his heart palpitate, he would have been in the seventh heaven of delight.

CHAPTER XXI.

WOMAN'S FAITH.

'Of all the torments, all the cares,
With which our lives are curst;
Of all the plagues a lover bears,
Sure rivals are the worst.

'By partners of each other kind
Afflictions easier grow;
In love alone we hate to find
Companions of our woe.'

How he did it he never could tell. He had no distinct remembrance of the circumstances, they seemed to have come about without any active volition of his own, and yet he must have done or said something, for she had promised to meet him in the twilight in that romantic dell, where the grey wolf-skin lay perdu in the bole of the hollow oak. Another thing that puzzled him, was that he thought O'Brien knew it—there was such an odd sort of twinkle in his eyes. Did Nell know also? he wondered—but could not tell; the moods of feeling that chased themselves across Nell's mirth-loving face were so various and so perplexing. Besides, he had no time to think the matter out—he had enough to do with himself. 'Within a short hour,' he kept saying to himself, 'your fate will be sealed one way or another.'

But how? What if he should be again possessed with a dumb devil? In this crisis of his life, he felt that it was for once absolutely imperative that he should say something more or less to the point, and his past experiences were not reassuring. He was tempted to envy, not for the first time, O'Brien's unceasing flow of talk. With his surprising facility

he would no doubt find it easy to propose in any place, in any form, any given number of times. While these thoughts were passing through his mind, he was making his way slowly, and with the utmost apparent unwillingness, down the river side to the trysting dell, dodging behind the trees, slinking slowly and wearily from one thicket to another; and then—'Oh heavens! what was that?' A pair of lovers, a common enough sight all the wide world over, but not there—not under that ancient birch, hoary with lichens, the venerable sentinel of Time in that silent wilderness. Who were they? O'Brien and Nell? No, that would have simply surprised him, not made his heart stand still with such a choking sense of suffocation. If these two had been his friend and Winnie's sister, he would only, after the first start of surprise, have passed them by with a muttered blessing; but although it was O'Brien, it was not Nell—it was—oh, there was no mistaking that slender graceful shape, that face beautiful as a poet's dream, half seen, half hid in the darkening twilight. He stood still, fascinated—half mistrusting his own senses, while from behind the screen afforded by the thick branches of a swamp maple he looked at them attentively. They appeared entirely unconscious of his presence, and there in the gathering darkness he stood and watched them, almost in spite of himself.

They were talking eagerly, but in tones so low that he could not catch a word of what they said distinctly, but he held her close to him, he saw that, and kissed her—yes, kissed her several times unresisted. He could scarcely repress a groan, and involuntarily taking a step nearer to them, strained his eyes through the uncertain light. He would fain have disbelieved their evidence if he could; but there was no delusion—they were serving him as truly now as they had ever done out on the trapper's round in the forest, or on the wide trackless prairie. It was Winnie who stood before him—the fair, single-hearted, true-seeming Winnie he had so fondly, but withal rashly, called his own; and the other

was his evil genius, the man whose life he had saved, his familiar friend, Denis O'Brien.

What seemed for the moment the foul ingratitude of the thing fairly stunned him. He leaned back against the trunk of the tree, dizzied, bewildered, and heart-sick. Then there was a rustle of feminine garments, and something brushed lightly past him. He looked up: she was walking up the valley towards the ranche, with her light elastic step. Scarcely aware of what he was doing, he followed her slowly, conscious all the time of a sharp pain, as if a knife had been run into his heart, until she disappeared into the warmth and light of the opened door, and he remained out in the darkness. He leant back against the gable of the cattle shed, fighting as he best could with the sick, sinking sensation of anguish and despair that weighed upon him. An hour passed, and he was still leaning there, hard and cold as a stone. He was not angry—it did not occur to him to fume Othello-like over his disappointment; on the contrary, he took to it naturally, as if it had been all along the thing that might have been expected. All his defects and shortcomings rushed in an overwhelming flood over his memory, and, in rapid contrast to these, all her beauty and grace, all the thousand and one delightful associations blended with her image, which must now be as nothing to him.

What a miscalculation he had made! How, blinded by his own vanity and want of experience, he had misinterpreted her feelings! He felt as if he were at fault at every point, lost in a maze of miserable conjecture, conscious only of one thing, that his mistake, if it had not broken his heart, of which he was by no means sure, had at least put an end for ever to his simple, tender, honest hopes of happiness.

The conviction, so unfounded, that she loved him, that she was beginning to return his affection, had given him by fits and flashes a few moments of perfect happiness—but now, void of all reality, the fabric of his hopes had crumbled into ashes around him. He was like a man from whom some warm robe of comfort had fallen, and who was left to face the wintry

blasts of misfortune with no better covering than the miserable rags and tatters of his vanished happiness. That morning he had said to himself that life was insupportable without Winnie, and now Winnie was unattainable; and all that could be done was to fight the misery which had swooped down with such a heavy hand upon his head. He had never had much patience for lover-like sorrows and perplexities; and on one point he was determined, writhe as he might upon Cupid's hook, he would keep his writhings to himself, and stoic-like endure any torture save the half-contemptuous pity of others.

So with a shake he drew himself together: he had his work left. Yes, of course, very consoling it would prove in due time, no doubt, but not now. What was to be done first? What was to be faced first? Oh, to go back to the house! He felt physically weak—ill—almost old, as if he had lived twenty years in that bitter hour. He would not have been a whit surprised to have found his face wrinkled, and his hair white, so sweeping and entire was the change that seemed to himself to have passed over him, and which yet, he concluded, with some surprise, must have left his outward appearance much what it was before, for no one seemed astonished at his entrance, or stared at him with any surprise; only O'Brien, who was chatting with Nell, glanced at him, he fancied, with an air at once triumphant and questioning, as of one who, striking down a foe in the arena, should say, '*Habet.*'

He had it, sure enough, deep in his quivering heart, but he disdained to show it other than by what he flattered himself was a look of stolid unconcern. Whereupon the heartless wretch cried out:

'What has happened to you, Blake?—you look absolutely ferocious.'

'I am cold, that is all,' and he moved towards the fire.

He was cold, frozen almost into an icicle, but he had no relapse, as he had feared he should have, of his imbecile bashful-

ness : that belonged, it seemed, to the world of hope, not to that of despair. He was, on the contrary, more himself than he had ever yet been. He talked fully as much as O'Brien ; he even laughed, and sometimes, but not often, he lifted his moody eyes from the fire, to fix them on the attractive countenance of Old Ike, never contriving to do so, however, without having his glances intercepted by Winnie, who kept her yearning, wistful eyes fixed upon him, with something almost of upbraiding in their soft depths.

Contemptible coquette ! did she think she had not yet befooled him sufficiently ? He had been a dolt, an idiot, an imbecile wretch, but he had at least fancied he loved a simple, true, earnest woman, not a soulless flirt who had a smile for any or every man.

If she had been all he fancied her, she might have been a magnet to draw forth latent capabilities, of which he had not even dreamt, in his nature. But there—again that glance, fond, beseeching, innocent, as if the pure spirit that looked through it could not even conceive the enormities of the feminine rôle he had just imagined her playing. He began to get bewildered, he made answers at random, he provoked Old Ike's somewhat unrefined badinage, till the stupid old man began to rally him upon being in love.

With awful solemnity he disclaimed the charge. He supposed there were such asses in the world, but he was quite incapable of such folly. All this he uttered, and a great deal more, not very coherent, to the same effect. He said it too with so much intention, that not one, but all the arrows with which it was bristling went home to one conscious and stricken heart. Winnie, calm, self-contained Winnie, uttered a low, half-suppressed scream.

'What is it, dear ?' asked Nell, anxiously.

'I—I—oh, I thought I saw a rattlesnake !'

Rattlesnake indeed ! Well, perhaps she did, with the mind's eye, in her own false heart.

'But you know,' said Nell, quietly, reasoning the point,

'that's quite impossible, dear; rattlesnakes seldom come into houses, and are never seen anywhere just now, either out of doors or in.'

'It was stupid of me, I dare say,' said Winnie, 'but I feel, oh so ill!—help me, dear!' and she fell against Nell in a dead faint.

He was not sorry for her. It seemed only just and equal that she also should be a little uncomfortable. Why should all the misery of the thing fall to his share, if, indeed, her sudden illness had anything at all to do with mental disquietude or remorse? He had made one great mistake already in judging of her feelings, he was not going to make another; henceforth she was nothing to him, and he would think no more of her.

A doughty resolve, but one which he found it difficult to keep; for her image was like a magnet, drawing his thoughts towards her in spite of himself.

In a short time Nell returned, looking grave and subdued. 'Winnie was better,' she said, and his heart gave a great thump of relief, in spite of his new-born stoicism.

'Dolt! idiot!' he asked himself in a fury. 'What is that to you, you prince of asses?' And then they had supper—quite a feast for a trapper fresh from a shanty in the backwoods; but if it had been the most *recherché* meal ever set before gods or men, he could have tasted but little that night of the joys of a gastronome. He could not eat; every mouthful he forced down his unwilling throat threatened to choke him, while O'Brien, blatant, babbling, rollicking as usual, revelled in the good things provided for him with all the insouciance of a true Sybarite. What were broken hearts to him? Faugh! what was anything but the meal of the moment? And this was her choice—he blushed for her; he felt a withering, consuming contempt for womanhood for her sake.

Her choice!—yes. Ah! so it seemed. He looked at O'Brien carefully. The fellow was looking well—at least, as

well as it was possible, for a small slight man to look ; and there was something which he supposed women would admire in the changeful play of expression that swept over those regular, sensitive, mobile features. For himself, he knew better ; the ruffian had no feelings except for his dinner, as she would soon find out. He thought, and he was not without a grim satisfaction in the idea, that if he were the wife of such a man, he should find the cares and cares of much serving too intolerably wearisome for human patience ; and yet the wretch was amusing when he chose. And he did choose to be so to-night, and our afflicted hero did his best to second him and retain Old Ike, for he dreaded of all things in the world being left alone with his familiar friend.

It was not possible, however, to cheat Old Ike out of more than an hour or two of his natural rest ; then he went off chuckling to bed, and he was left alone with his friend and rival.

‘Got the wolf-skin, eh, Blake?’

‘Yes,’ was the grim response, stooping the while to gather together the embers on the hearth.

‘Thought you would ; you are a particularly good shot.’

The vile truckler !—but he was not to be caught with such transparent chaff, and so made no answer.

‘I have been quite anxious about you. You have no idea how much I have thought about you of late.’

‘Indeed ? I hope it has not impaired your digestion.’

‘No, it has not, I am thankful to say ; but still—hang it, Blake, you are such a close fellow, you know !—would you mind telling me, now, if you have presented that small lupine tribute of affection yet ?’

‘I would very much like if you would mind your own affairs,’ growled Frank between his teeth.

‘Thought as much. It is intolerable anguish, I verily believe, for you Scotch to make a clean breast about anything. We Paddies take to the process more kindly. Blake, my dear friend, I have a confession to make to you.’



‘Got the wolf-skin, eh, Blake?’

[Page 220.]

'I know you have, but it is unnecessary; I already know all you wish to say.'

'You do, do you? How in the world have you found it out? but, however,' in a relieved tone, 'it's all right, then, and you forgive me. I could not help it, you see, the provocation was so great.'

'I grant all that.'

'But you are not the same; although you say you forgive me, the frightful, almost demoniac expression of countenance with which you sat at meat to-night still lingers upon your brow.'

'If this is meant for a joke, sir, I consider it in very bad taste.'

'Do you know, Blake, you are unmercifully sulky? What if I did have my little joke?—it has done no harm. You are so atrociously self-conceited that you require to be taken down a peg or two. We both thought that. There, that is the truth, and you need not glare at me in that wolfish way, as if you would like to eat me up. You, too, whom I used to think the most placable, easy-going fellow I ever met.'

'Well, suppose you think no more about me.'

'Blake!' in a tone of serious remonstrance, 'to hear you, one would fancy you absolutely hated me to-night.'

'Well, perhaps I do a little; but you will survive it.'

'I hope so, and I hope, too, that you will get out of this doleful fit of sulks; and in the meantime, to show that I harbour no unchristian feeling against you, I wish you a very good-night.'

Frank made no audible rejoinder, but in his heart he said: 'And to think that I once loved this man much as "Jonathan loved David;" certainly the scales have fallen from my eyes with a vengeance!' Then he thought of his last night's adventures, and how near he had been to resting from all his labours, and all his trials too, in the wolf's maw, and upon the whole he thought it was rather a pity that he had escaped. 'I dare say,' he reflected, 'it would only have been a little

unpleasant at the first, and it would have been soon over. The well-informed in such matters are agreed that sensation in the victim is deadened, much as in the poor mouse when grimalkin tosses it back and forward in her paws. Whereas this——' and then he had some dismal reflections in which life seemed to stretch on before him, a vast, illimitable parched-up arid Sahara, wherein no gushing fountain of emotion could henceforth spring, or oasis of affection flourish. The view of this enlivening prospect, which he thus surveyed from his sorrowful Pisgah of disappointment, affected him profoundly; but yet he was not without a certain sorrowful enjoyment of his grief. He revelled in it as a luxury, he wallowed in his garments of sackcloth, and on the whole did not find them an altogether distasteful mental garniture. 'I am horribly unhappy,' he repeated a great many times; and then, by dint perhaps of the repetition, to his own profound surprise he fell asleep, and slept as only a youthful hunter who has been chased all the previous night by wolves can sleep.

Next morning when he awoke, of course it all came back to him and flooded him, and he was lower than ever. He felt desolate, ill-used, heart-broken, sick of life, and with a moody longing for death which was counteracted in the most natural but at the same time ridiculous way by a very keen and healthy longing for his breakfast. 'His heart might break, and brokenly live on,' but it was imprisoned in a tabernacle that would not stand any nonsense in respect of victuals. 'I want some coffee and buckwheat cake and broiled ham,' said the less spiritual part of him; and after a time he did as the less spiritual part of him bade him, and felt upon the whole the better for it. And then more manly feelings came to his aid: the great happiness, the full contentment, the joy of happy love could not be his, but that did not necessarily make up the whole of life. His duty was left to him, and with God's help he resolved to do it. Life's realities, it is true, looked prosaic and uninviting, yet he had found in them full contentment before the spell of this strong passion had

changed the whole world to him ; now he must come back out of his enchanted dreamland—and he did come back, a little more subdued, more stolid, as to outward demeanour, but otherwise unchanged. .

Of the two, Winnie looked the more disconsolate ; her appearance, indeed, the only time he trusted himself to look at her, was so abjectly wretched that he was amazed. ‘It seems to have made her more miserable than jolly,’ he thought ; and he remembered to have heard of such girls, who like to have lots of fellows spooning after them, and feel by no means obliged to the bold lover who, by forcing them to accept him, spoils their little game. Then furthermore he reflected that, although love is proverbially blind, no one in his senses could think of comparing him, a fine-looking manly fellow almost six feet two, with a handsome expressive face of his own, if ‘the sun’s too ardent frown’ had not dyed it such a deep fiery red brick-brown, with O’Brien, who at the best was only a tolerably passable little man. Yes ; he did not wonder she was not very jolly, and although disposed to be charitable to all men, he was not sorry for her.

At this juncture O’Brien, animated, beaming all life and energy, burst into the room. ‘Hang the fellow ! there were moments when he did look uncommonly well, and this was one.’ With all his previous schooling of himself, he felt something approaching a homicidal mania shoot through his breast, but smothered it instantly, and bit savagely into the wedge of cheese he was conveying to his mouth.

‘Blake ! Blake !’ cried his unabashed rival, with airy volubility. ‘I have just seen an apparition in the distance which will soon rouse you out of your doleful dumps ; I want to see if you can guess who it is—try now.’

‘I have really no head for conundrums.’

‘What, still in the dismals ? Well, I will tell you : I think I see Pompey in the distance, manfully bestriding your grey Bucephalus, with all the rest of the squadron cantering after him, and the sight makes my heart glad. I do love that blackie

—such a faithful, attached, serviceable creature, and then such a cook !

Miserable trifier ! could he really not look beyond his dinner ? It was necessary to eat, no doubt, but not to go down on one's knees at every available opportunity to the mode and manner of it. So, contenting himself with looking the disgust he felt, Frank merely said :

‘ If Pompey is there, something must have happened,’ and started off to meet him.

He could see him a long distance off before he came up to him, and changed his mind often as to his identity. One moment he was sure it was Pompey, the next he began to doubt ; but Pompey it really was, with all the horses and all the valuable stock of furs, arms, and household articles—which were not many.

‘ Why, Pompey,’ he exclaimed in surprise, ‘ you seem to be here bag and baggage ?’

‘ Yes, massa,’ said Pompey, producing, with much ceremony, something from the bosom of his hunting-shirt. ‘ Me find dat de vary day you leave,’ and he produced a broken Indian arrow. ‘ Ob course, dat make me tink and look too, and soon me saw dem savages a good bit away, moving about. Den me look for de trail ob de horses, and go after dem ; me catch Bucephalus first. After dat, all easy, de horses come and we load. Dan me tink a long time whether me go dat night or not. “ What we do, Nero ?” I say. “ What we do, my shild ?” And Nero, him look berry grave, and lay him nose down and howl ; me no like dat. “ We go dis night,” I say ; “ dere is no knowing what dem painted savages may do. You yeerie dat, Nero ; you yeerie dat, my shild ?” And he gave one leetle sharp quick bark ; me know as well as if him had spoken dat him pleased, and so we go, and ride—ride—ride like de berry wind—and much need to, for before we go—go far on our road, we see flames rising up into de air, and looking back, dere was de dear ole house dat we build our own shelves, dat we be so happy in, all blazing up into de red sky, and all de night we

ride, Nero and I, for him tire ob running and jomp up, and sit before me on de grey horse like one Christian gentleman, and now, massa, what we do, for de painted savages is behind us?

'Come and get some food in the first place, Pompey. O'Brien ought to be obliged to you, if he is not, for you have saved all our property, and as for the Indians, the old farmer here has been looking out for them for some time, and I don't doubt but we shall be able to give a good account of them. Come along.'

Pompey's tale, when told, produced, as was natural, a great deal of excitement.

'Are the Injuns here?' cried Old Ike, in a half-grumbling, half-excited manner. 'I was goin' to say I was right glad on't, for I hate them like pison; but arter all, I'm not so young as I wor, and it's lonesome up here all by myself, and with the gals, too, to take care on, and so it's glad I am, strangers, to see you, and the sooner we make tracks to the fort and put it in fighting order the better,' and he trudged sturdily off in the direction of the forest.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE FOREST CITADEL.

'Perish the man whose mind is backward now.'
Henry V.

THE young men followed him, O'Brien pausing, as was natural, to say a word to the girls; but it was to Nell, Frank observed, with some surprise, that he spoke, and not to Winnie. It puzzled him, but he had no means of solving the riddle, and he turned rather to the thrilling and not unwelcome ex-

citement of the new situation. He had read much about Indian warfare, its cruel, exterminating character, its treachery and its frequent surprises; now he was about to experience them for himself.

‘Whereabouts are these skulking redskins?’ said O’Brien, coming up behind.

‘Not within sight yet, as far as I can make out, which is lucky, as our fort, I take it, is neither armed nor victualled.’

‘My dear fellow, that is what worries me. I can fight—fact is, I rather like it, although you look incredulous—but not, oh ye gods! upon an empty stomach,’ and he heaved a deep sigh and became silent for five minutes or more.

‘Blake, I say Blake, this is a terrible pity!—Pompey’s vocation will be lost, his talents wasted!’

‘Not a bit of it; he can fight, not perhaps so well as you, but then he is not so fastidious as to his grub, and so may be reckoned quite as efficient a member of the garrison.’

They had now entered the wood, which consisted of large timber, with patches of hemlock, through which they forced their way, following the track left by Old Ike until they reached a wide open glade. In the centre of this clearing rose a bare, abrupt, conical hill, the top of which was crowned with a curious castellated erection of logs, something like an old Scotch border keep, loop-holed all round with narrow apertures for rifles, and having a court below fenced in with a high palisade for the cattle, the whole being surrounded by a deep but dry ditch.

When Blake and O’Brien came up, they found Old Ike holding forth to one or two men, wizened and weather-beaten like himself—his next neighbours, he explained, who in seasons of danger were accustomed to form part of the garrison of the castle, the victualling and arming of which now went forward with great expedition. Every one had to work, and no one had time to think of himself,

except indeed O'Brien, whose fears with regard to the commissariat were apt to take something too much of a personal form.

'And you hold it for sartain,' said one of the strangers, addressing Old Ike, 'that them skulking vagabonds is out on the war-trail?'

'Yes, I reckon they're out on a haar-raising raid,' returned Old Ike; 'but although the matter looks serious, we've had accidents as bad afore. I needn't ask, comrades, if you'll stand to me and each other staunch and true, for we are so sitivated that the safety of each man's scalp depends upon his neighbour's, and I kalkilate that's a bond that will hold us together.'

'I guess you're about right, old hoss,' said another of the strangers.

'Here come the cattle,' said O'Brien, with undisguised thankfulness in his tones; 'if it comes to the worst, at least we shall always have beef.'

The long day was now drawing to its close; Old Ike, with the air of a trusty general, declared the arrangements complete, and guessed, moreover, that his friends would need filling up.

'I reckon you're right, old hoss,' answered one of the strangers; 'what with natur' and the hill air, as long as we live we must eat.'

'Look smart then, gals,' cried the old man, 'and bring us supper.'

Winnie and Nell now bustled about, assisted by their old Indian help, and very soon a plain, but nutritious meal was placed on the table, and done full justice to by the whole party, not excepting the disconsolate Frank, who, as he ate his supper, could not forbear throwing an inquisitive glance occasionally in Winnie's direction. She looked pale and depressed, but busied herself about her necessary duties, which were so habitual to her that she worked away at them mechanically, despite her evident state of

suffering and distress, which he ascribed to a natural feminine apprehension and concern for the safety of her father and her betrothed.

Supper discussed, a tall powerful man, by name Joe Winter, got up, and looking the old man full in the face, addressed him thus :

'Now, old man, I reckon natur' is satisfied, so let us to business. We must have a scout to-night, if we are to awake in our scalps to-morrow morning I kalkilate, so let's cast lots who's to be sentinel. That's fair and square, I guess, for I ain't for asking odds of any man.'

'True for you, Joe ; you have about fixed it ; you air a bully-boy, and no mistake.'

Lots were then cast, and to Frank's surprise it fell upon him.

'I guess, young man, you've never sarved that turn before,' said one of the strangers ; 'you look skeart. Have I fixed you thar ?'

Frank modestly admitted that he had, but stated at the same time that he was most anxious to be of use, and quite willing to undertake the duty if all it implied were fully explained to him.

'Right,' said his mentor, approvingly ; 'youth is the time to larn ; and that idee of yourn, of getting it explained to you, ain't bad. I'll see to it myself.'

'And do you think, old hoss, that this camp of yourn is high proof, and will set them skulking varmint at defiance ?' broke in another voice.

'Sartain,' was the confident rejoinder ; 'the Injun ain't born yet that can get behind them stout logs.'

'I guess,' said another, 'that we would soon make an end of them if they had not the cover so handy to skulk into.'

Frank meanwhile was taking a hasty survey of the forest camp, which seemed to him very well suited for the purpose for which it was intended. It was well sheltered, and was

naturally so strong, that a garrison of a few resolute men with plenty of ammunition, which it appeared they had, might easily keep a large number of assailants at bay.

So admirably chosen did the situation seem to him, that he could not forbear expressing his admiration of its natural advantages to Joe Winter.

'It looks amazin' well,' answered that worthy in a low, guarded tone, 'but it has got a drawback, like most things on the airth, I guess.'

'And that is what?'

'A scarcity of wather; not but what there will be plenty at this season, I kalkilate, and whether or no, it ain't manful now, is it, comrade, to make too much of the natural difficulties of the place?'

'Certainly not,' rejoined Frank, preparing to mount guard, which he found, to his undisguised astonishment, was after no such fashion as he had ever heard or read of before.

'Where shall I take up my position?' he asked.

'Here,' answered Joe Winter, indicating a patch of hemlock scrub. 'And now down you go upon your stomach, young un.'

'What, grovel like a worm? You're joking surely?'

'No, stranger, I have no consait that way; I'm in sober airnest. If you stand upright, the Injun riptyles skulking in the bush will think nothing of sending an arrow through your heart, and neither you nor me a whit wiser, the more's the pity. Such bein' the case, a scout that has to watch Injuns must conform to redskin natur' and redskin ways; at least, I am opinionated that no other can be of any use.'

'You are right, I am convinced, and I will do as you wish me.'

'That's judicious and manful, stranger, and you'll only have the first part of the night; I will take the last half myself.'

Expressing his thanks, Frank got into the required position, with his rifle at full cock by his side, and his finger on the

trigger, and renewed his assurances that under no circumstances would he be caught napping.

'I reckon not, the first night, at least,' said the frontier man, with a short laugh, as he withdrew, leaving Frank alone at his post.

He was, as was natural, in a rapt, excited frame of mind. All the stories he had heard of Indian border warfare rushed back to his memory as he lay along the ground, keeping his solitary watch, his ear strained to catch the slightest sound. The night was so gloomy, that he could see little; the forest, looming shadowy and fantastic through the darkness, might be full of Indians, for all he could see to the contrary. For the purposes of his watch the sense of hearing was alone available, and he endeavoured, as he lay, to catch the smallest sound that might denote anything like danger.

Once or twice a chirp like that of a bobalink fell on his ear, and he listened to it with some surprise, wondering what the bird was doing awake after nightfall. Then he concluded it had been disturbed by an owl or a hawk, and thought no more of it for a few minutes, until the note was repeated in the direction of a large cedar tree, the only one spared, which grew close to the palisade.

'It is curious,' he thought, 'and yet I cannot think of any other explanation to it,' and he kept straining his ears to catch some other sound, but minute after minute passed, and there was around him only the deathlike stillness of the wilderness.

He had squatted in this manner in his irksome position for a couple of hours, when he was suddenly aroused by the unmistakable crackling of dry twigs, and, peeping cautiously around, saw between him and the sky, which was now illumined by a faint glimmer of moonlight, an Indian stealthily making his way to the tree. Lightly he moved, as if treading on air, but not so lightly as not to attract the intent ears of the watchful sentinel.

For a moment, as if alarmed in his turn by Frank's

almost imperceptible movement, the savage made a dead pause, and the sentinel lying in the scrub could see his wild, fierce eyes glancing all around him, as if in search of the cause of the slight sound. Involuntarily Frank brought his rifle a little more forward, and, as he did so, the savage rapidly cocked and poised his, and fired into the scrub in the direction of the slight rustling, the ball whistling past Frank's ear, but doing him no other damage. Almost at the same moment he fired, and, having the advantage of a more deliberate aim, with better effect: the Indian, with an appalling yell, leapt into the air, and then fell flat out all along the ground on his face, while hurry-scurrying into the courtyard as fast as alarm and curiosity could bring them rushed the alarmed garrison.

'This bullet has found its billet, I reckon. Well done, young 'un!' cried rough Joe Winter.

'The less said the better, I guess, in times like these,' growled Old Ike.

A moment's silence succeeded, which was broken by the report of a rifle, and then by a wild war-whoop, so loud and appalling that it seemed uttered by a hundred throats. Falling back upon each other against the doorway, the startled garrison made the best stand they could, and for some minutes a furious hand-to-hand struggle ensued. The frontier men, animated at once by the instinct of self-preservation, and that inborn hatred of the Indians which had been engendered by a long list of mutual injuries and wrongs, fought like demons—firing in the grey light of the dawn often wide of the mark, but still so effectually holding their own as to compel their assailants to withdraw, which they did with the utmost reluctance, raising a wild chorus of hideous yells as they retired, and often returning again and again to the charge, preventing thereby the well-nigh exhausted garrison from saving the body of a frontier man who had fallen early in the fray. The corpse was scalped in one of these attacks, and, having secured this trophy, the savages

at last retired, with shouts and yells of mingled triumph and disappointment.

Shuddering at the frightful spectacle which was enacted before their eyes, Frank breathlessly whispered to O'Brien :

'Do you think the man was dead?'

'I hope so,' he answered ; 'but these wretches have been known to scalp men who were still alive ; and the victims have been known to survive it, too.'

'Impossible !'

'I don't say it happens often, and I would not advise any one to trust to the contingency ; but I have myself seen a man who had lost his scalp in this frightful border warfare, and was, when I saw him, alive and well.'

All was now still and silent, where lately oaths and execrations, groans, shrieks, and the most furious turmoil had reigned. The wide forests and distant hills showed cold and grey beneath the softened light of dawn, and the peaceful beauty of the morning seemed to protest against the wild raging of the fierce hounds of internecine strife. Even Old Ike appeared to feel its influence.

'Come in, boys,' he said, 'and we'll open the windows and let in the sun. I guess some of us little thought to see him shine so brightly again.'

'Long Jim has gone to his account,' cried one reckless frontier man, 'and that's the damage, all told. As for the red-skins, there's three—four—six of them, I kalkilate. That's your'n, stranger. I know him by the way he's lying,' and he gave the body a careless kick with his foot, while Frank looked down at it with mingled emotions. He had fired in discharge of his duty and in self-defence, but it seemed to him that he was almost like Cain, as he stood thus in cold blood and looked down upon the man he had killed.

He was soon joined by Pompey, who had manfully acted his part during the short struggle, but who was now in a state of violent excitement, in which, as usual, superstitious

terror bore a large share. There was upon his mind a vivid impression of the horrors of violent death, and a terrified expectation that the spirits of those whom he had helped to send to their last account had not yet done with him.

'You tink Duppy come back?' he asked anxiously of his master; 'because if he come back, what we do?'

'They will not come back, Pompey, my poor fellow—of that you need not be the least afraid; it is the living we have to dread, not the dead.'

'Never fear, stranger,' cried Joe Winter, 'we have treed the varmint, I guess, and after they have hung about for a day or two they'll get wearied out, and make tracks for some other human huntin' ground, where scalps are a trifle easier to come by. I guess they paid considerable high for Long Jim's last night?'

'That's no consarn of your'n,' grumbled Old Ike. 'To be on the square with you, boys, I wish we were well out of this business. There's more of them by a half, I kalkilate, than I ever saw in these parts afore, and they may come up agin us time after time, till they fairly weary us out.'

'Breakfast is ready, father,' said the sweet voice of Winnie.

'And I kalkilate we're ready for it,' said one of the frontier men, and the whole party sat down, grave, silent, and anxious.

'What do you think will be the upshot of this?' asked O'Brien at last.

'I guess, stranger, you may as well ask me if it will be rain or sunshine the day after to-morrow. It's not in natur that I or any other man can tell you what them red riptyles will be after next.'

Here the dialogue terminated, to be resumed in snatches, in the same strain, all through the long anxious day, in which, however, they made sure of two things. They were closely hemmed round by a vastly superior force, and a close guard was kept upon them, a fact of which Joe Winter had unpleasant proof, for volunteering to turn the cattle out to

pasture, an arrow whizzed past, so close to his head, that it actually went through his hair.

'That's skeert me pretty considerable, I reckon. Look yar, old man, them varmint are swarming outside, and what's to come of the cattle?'

Old Ike groaned.

'I kalkilate it's a bad job—a bad job.'

'They can't mean to make us stand a regular siege?' said Nell.

'It's onlikely, gal—it's onlikely,' answered the downright frontier man, 'but it's a question that must be faced. Look yar, stranger,' addressing Frank, 'I have no book-larnin', and I guess you're a judgmatical man: I wish you would tell us what's to be done with this here well. We're victualled for a month, may be more, but the water you see is running short already.'

'It is almost dry!' cried Frank. 'And that gone, what shall we do?'

'I guess you have about fixed me there, stranger. The red-skinned varmint skulking in the bush will take good care we don't go outside to get it, and what with a power of things, I reckon I'm clean befustered, and as much off my head as Old Ike. What between his gals and his cattle, the old man, as is nat'ral, no doubt, is good for nothing in the way of advice, and so I wish I could hear what you think, stranger, in our difficulty.'

'I am afraid what I have to suggest won't be of much use,' said Frank. 'The only thing that occurs to me is to try to deepen the well.'

'You have fixed it, stranger, I kalkilate you have fixed it. That would be the ticket, if we could only manage it, but then the terms are onadmissible to us. It's down on the solid rock, and we have not got the right sort of we'pons—d'ye see?'

'Are you sure of that?'

'Sartain and sure, stranger.'

'Then there is nothing to be done that I can see, except calling the whole lot of us together and explaining the serious circumstances of the case, and the necessity of economizing to the utmost the slender supply of water.'

'Right stranger, you never said a truer word; and to think that I should never have thought of that! I'll go and tell the boys of this new jippardy myself. There's one of the gals—do you make out if you can how many gallons we are likely to have less or more.'

'Nell,' said Frank, turning in the girl's direction, but scarcely looking at her. 'It seems that we are not unlikely to run short of water. Can you tell me how much we have?'

'I am Winnie,' said the elder sister, in her usual soft sweet tones, which made his heart beat quick, for he fancied that they were full of sadness and reproach.

'Well, Winnie,' he said, trying to speak indifferently, 'you will do as well as Nell. Do you think you could find out for me how much water there is?'

'I will find out and tell you,' she said; but Nell came back with the message—'Four gallons, not a drop more.'

'Four gallons! and there are twelve of us—of course we must allowance ourselves, and even with that it won't last more than three days.'

When the usual time for supper arrived, the water was strictly measured out, amid many melancholy conjectures as to the future, and outspoken comments on Old Ike's obstinacy. For it seemed he had often been warned of the unsatisfactory nature of the water supply, and had neglected at least one opportunity of deepening the well.

To all these accusations, which were very plainly put, with no mincing of the matter, the old man returned no answer, but sat with his head bent down on his hands, so wrapped in moody thought that he seemed lost to all external sights or sounds.

At last he looked suddenly up. 'Are you in raal arnest, comrades? will you stand by me and my darters?'

Joe Winter uttered a loud laugh. 'That's a good un, Old Ike; I reckon that's about the best one I have heard for a long time. Here we are, cooped up like rats in an old barn, with a rifle ball or an arrow to choose between if we show so much as the tip of our nose at the door, and you speak of us desarting you and your darters, as if it wor the easiest thing in natur. According to my idees, we're not likely to desart you in a hurry. I'm opinionated raather that we'll have to stand by you in this strait through all advarsities—aye, and die with you too, though that will sarve neither you nor us. Them's my sentiments touching that p'int.'

'And you have spit it out well, too, old hoss,' remarked an admiring friend.

'The cattle are as good as lost,' resumed Old Ike in a heart-broken tone; 'I wouldn't begrudge the water so much for myself, if I had just a mouthful for them; such cattle too!—not the like of them in the backwoods! And if they're turned adrift, the Injuns will track them every hoof. An Injun has as good a nose for tracking as a sleuth-hound. I conclude you are of that way of thinking, comrades?'

'Sartainly,' rejoined Joe, who was usually spokesman for the rest. 'Sartainly, there's reason in your idee—that can't be denied; the Injuns will get them every hoof.'

Old Ike groaned, and then looked round with a hungry intensity of longing in his blinking eyes.

'We have fou't the inimy, and we have conquered so far, and it's onbeknown to us when the varmint may take it into their heads to skedaddle. It may be this very night, and that herd could not be got together again for love or money; and when it's all so onsartain, couldn't you spare a sup of water for them, comrades?'

'It can't be done,' said Joe Winter, with slow deliberateness. 'No, old man, it can't be done at any price. The water is the breath of life to us in our present strait, that's sure and sartain; and look yar, them cattle must be turned loose to-night when the sentinel is placed; they have scarcely

had a bite to eat all day, and they are half mad, I reckon, with thirst and hunger.'

'Not while I stand by,' growled the old man; 'I'll not see it—I'll not live to see it, I tell you.'

'I guess you need not look at it unless you like,' muttered the matter-of-fact Joe; 'but it's got to be done, all the same.' And motioning to one or two of his friends, he left the room, while Old Ike gave way, first to the most violent anger, and then to the most poignant lamentations, which Winnie and Nell tried in vain to moderate. Seating themselves one on each side of him, they strove to comfort him, while he, growling between them, looked, Joe Winter said, like nothing so much in the world as a tethered bear.

'Well, it's over,' he said at last, 'and all the lamentations in the world won't mend the matter, or make me the man I was this mornin'. Run, Winnie gal, and tell the stranger, Frank Blake, to look keen after them Injun skunks; maybe they'll make tracks after the cattle, and leave us time to get down to the river and back. If I am no longer to be the master in my own fort, I won't have that boasting Joe Winter, at least, to be general after me—run, gal!'

'I will go,' said Nell, starting up, and she delivered the message, which only elicited a good-natured laugh from Joe Winter.

'So the old man notions you for commander-in-chief, eh, comrade? Waal, I ain't objectin'; I've no head-gifts to speak of, and little book-larnin', and so if it's his pleasure to employ you on the a'rnd, just say what's to be done, commodore, and I'm the man to follow you into the Injun camp if you like, and that's what I call plain English.'

'I think,' said Frank modestly, 'that Old Ike is right; we might make a reconnaissance, one or two of us, and see if the ground is clear.'

'That's a good consait; we'll larn at least where the wild cats are.'

This resolution was no sooner taken than it was carried

into effect. Frank and three others stole out in the dusk after the last of the cattle, and made as careful a survey as they could of the open space between the fort and the forest. Not a living creature was visible; the birds had gone to their roost under the twigs, the squirrels were in their snug nests, sheltering from the wind, which blew out fitfully in squally gusts. 'The very night for us,' whispered Frank to his companions, following it up with 'Now you lead, Joe'; you've been in many of these frontier fights, and I am but a green-horn.'

'Waal, of a sartainty that's true,' returned Joe, gliding to the front. 'Now, boys, move as if you were walking on air, or there will be some of us not so comfortable about the top story as we are at present;' and he straightway set the example by moving forward at a slow pace, and with the most stealthy caution, his companions following with equal care, after a fashion which was almost noiseless. If a twig crackled, or a bent bough sprang back with a rebound, Joe paused and peered earnestly all around him.

'What we must make a p'int o' larnin' first,' he whispered to his companions, 'is the whereabouts of the fire.'

'There it is,' said Frank, pointing to a glimmer of light which appeared at a distance between the trunks of the trees.

'Look yaar, boys,' said Joe, in an impressive whisper, 'yonder is our beacon—now follow me,' and he stalked forward in the same noiseless manner, but at a swifter pace than before.

The night had now become very dark, so that they could scarcely discern in the forest the trunks of the nearest trees, or the figures one of another; but in a certain sense this darkness was favourable—it enabled them to get near the camp without being seen themselves. It was situated in a small dell, and the absence of any attempt to hide it showed the strength of the party.

A more picturesque sight could not well be imagined: the

fire was a large one, composed of the large branches and trunks of trees, and round it were scattered groups of Indians, some sitting, some lying along the ground, some half seen in the shadowy gloom, others standing boldly out in the ruddy glow of the leaping flames. Those of them who were nearest the little party of adventurers seemed to Frank fine-looking fellows, with a mien at once free and noble, the chest well thrown forward, the head erect. They were dressed in leather hunting-shirts, with leggings of deer skin, fringed along the edges. Their heads were decorated with tufts of feathers, and while some held a rifle, one or two carelessly swung in one hand a bow and arrows; while others at a little distance, seated in a circle, were playing at some game, rapidly passing some small object from hand to hand, talking and laughing the while with earnest gesticulation and expressive gestures. Some of these players were women, and at a little distance behind, but lit up by the glare of the fire, could be seen the skin tents or lodges of the party; near which a group of women were standing, apparently conversing with great earnestness.

After reconnoitring the party for a few minutes, Joe retired, followed by his companions, with even greater precautions than he had used when advancing.

'The darned skunks,' he said at last, when he was within such a distance as to render speech prudent: 'there's as many as twenty of them, and they are between us and the river.'

'There are not many rifles though, Joe, I guess,' said another.

'I kalkilate that makes little matter; an Injun will make more play any day with a bow and arrow than with the rifle.'

'I guess they mean to starve us out,' said a third.

'I reckon we have victuals enough,' said a fourth, 'but I'm kind o' skeart about the water; I guess, Joe, we had best skedaddle the first dark night.'

'Surely,' said Frank, 'you would not think of leaving

the old man and his daughters all alone here to fall a prey to these blood-thirsty Indians ?

‘Waal, stranger,’ said Joe, coming to the aid of his friend, ‘I readily allow that in a common case we should stay with the old man and his darters, but this is an extr’or’nary case, and all caused by Old Ike’s obstinacy. As waal have your haar raised, I say, as die of thirst : which is what the riptyles have in view ; and so, boys, my advice is that we should look about us. We should keep our ears and our eyes open, and if we see a chance of dodging them varmint, why, the sooner the better, and you had best make tracks along with us, stranger.’

‘Small as my experience is,’ said Frank, ‘it seems to me in the last degree unmanly to leave the helpless and weak to their fate, and shift for ourselves the moment real danger appears.’

‘Raal danger!’ re-echoed Joe, with a laugh ; ‘I and my mates dread danger as little as any man may. Give me a fair and open inimy, and an out-and-out fair and open fight, and I’ll fight it out to the end ; but when there’s them skulking riptyles on the outside, and a worse inimy within—why, look ya’ar, your eye may be as true, and your hand as steady as it likes, it won’t help you a bit, and there’s something in natur’ that goes agin dyin’ in that way, like a rat in its hole. I’m sure, stranger, you’re not so onreasonable as not to see that.’

‘It is easy enough to see your motive,’ said Frank, ‘whatever I may think of it.’

Nothing more was said, and they soon reached the forest citadel, and Frank, who remained outside, soon heard Joe and his companions in fierce altercation with Old Ike. In a few minutes O’Brien came up to him.

‘So, Blake,’ he said, ‘here is proof with a vengeance of how desperate our case is considered—the rats are leaving the sinking ship ; but you and I, I conclude, will stick to the old hooker to the last, and to one another too for that matter.’

There's a deal of consolation for me in that ; we have been such real true friends, now haven't we ?

'Of course ; but stow away all that sort of nonsense, O'Brien, till a more convenient opportunity, and let us consider what is to be done.'

'Why, what can be done—that's the rub. Here comes Sampson and his merry men ; it is plain that this tower of Old Ike's does not suit them. A fine evening, gentlemen, and a pleasant journey. I believe "The hair on the top of your head, and long may it wave there," is the correct toast in this part of the country, and I would pledge it to you in a parting doch and darroch, I am sure, if liquor of any kind were not so hard to come by in this sahara.'

'Harkee, stranger,' said Joe, with sudden fierceness. 'When you've enj'yed what you have said enough, you'll do a prudent act to hold your tongue. We would have stayed with Old Ike and his darters, aye, and fou't for them, too, but the tarms is onadmissable, and so I reckon we had best skedaddle. Is there moonlight enough, do you think, Bill, to strike the trail ?'

'I kalkilate there is,' answered the personage addressed, in a gruff, smothered voice, and then one after another they all filed out.

'Pleasant this,' said O'Brien ; 'ain't it now, Blake ? I think I'll go to bed and sleep, and so escape from anxious thoughts—I am tormented by them ; while you, I believe, never think at all. You look so stolidly wooden, I am half-inclined to envy you.'

'You will think better of that,' said Frank ; 'and so, as some one must be sentinel, and our garrison is so much reduced, I suppose I had better take the duty upon myself.'

'Do, there's a good fellow. You are worth all the knight-errants in the world. I shall tell Winnie to-morrow what a champion she has got.'

'In you, I suppose,' said Frank, with a coolness which surprised himself.

'My dear fellow—no; but I have no time to argue with you. I don't fancy sitting up till morning, so good-night, and remember how much hair depends upon your wakefulness. If you nod, off in a trice go all our wigs, and I own rather to having a weakness for mine.'

CHAPTER XXIII.

FRESH TRIALS.

'He's truly valiant that can wisely suffer
The worst that man can breathe.'

THE meeting between the members of the woefully diminished garrison next morning was grave and anxious; the women went sadly about the preparations for the morning meal, and the men talked together in broken snatches.

If the defection of their comrades was not discovered by the Indians, their position was not much worse than it had been before, and might in a certain sense be called better—for their scanty supply of water would last longer, when there were so many fewer demands upon it. Frank and O'Brien tried to speak hopefully of their position. The Indians would tire of the monotony of a siege—it was contrary to all their habits, and one fine morning they would find them all gone, and themselves free to walk out of their prison.

It was now Monday, the second of April : the weather outside was warm and pleasant ; while within, day succeeded to day, all alike wearisome and hopeless, and full of the most depressing monotony. There was nothing to excite or raise the spirits ; sometimes, but not often, an Indian scout was seen, and at night, now that they knew the direction in which to look for it, the glimmer of their fire was distinctly visible through the branches of the trees, right between them and the river.

The old man, affected by the difficulties of his position, the desertion of his old friends, and the danger of his daughters, made no attempt to bear up against his trials. That they were in this dreadful strait was his fault, as his friends had not failed to tell him. His conscience reproached him not a little, and the more so that he had involved Frank and O'Brien in his own danger. He resolved to tell them frankly that he had no hope, and to suggest to them that they had better follow the example of Joe Winter and his comrades as long as they had strength left to attempt the journey. Setting all the circumstances plainly before them, and frankly telling them that he had no hope, he asked them what they would do ?

'We will stay with you,' they both cried. 'It would be folly to ignore the danger in more ways than one of our position, but under the circumstances we ought to persevere, it strikes us, in our defence ; we must just go on to the end whatever it is. Having cast in our lot with you, we are not going to desert you now.'

'Thank you, strangers—I guessed as much ; but your words have a rational and encouraging sound to me. I'll not gainsay that, and I thank you both as a man and as a father from my heart.'

'How much longer do you think the Indians will hold out?' asked O'Brien.

'I kalkilate ye might as well ask me in what direction the wind will blow this time next year,' he muttered, sub-

siding into his usual sullen despondency. 'It's clean agin natur' as it is, I reckon.'

'We must wait patiently,' said Frank.

'Give me the glass,' said O'Brien, scanning intently for the hundredth time the solitudes around. 'I can see the dusky wretches quite plainly' he exclaimed, 'cooking and gambling and eating, and decorating their long lank persons with paint, wampum, and I don't know all what.'

During these weary days, Frank was necessarily thrown much with the two girls, but this enforced companionship, which would once have been productive of so much pleasure to him, was now only a source of the keenest pain. He was much beside Winnie, for O'Brien, curiously enough, seemed to prefer to talk to Nell, and he became, in spite of himself, more and more alive to the rectitude, the native readiness, the truthful charm of character which so peculiarly distinguished this rose of the wilderness.

'She is an angel,' he said to himself, 'not because of her bright beauty, but because of her good, kind, loving heart. O'Brien is a lucky man—lucky even to die here with her, knowing as he must do that she loves him.'

Nell, as was natural, seemed a great deal less interesting to him in all respects; but she talked more—was, indeed, rather gifted in that respect, which made him wonder the less that O'Brien, although the lover of the elder sister, should so frequently be found by the side of the younger.

It was Monday, the second of April, as has been observed before, the longest, the most unsupportable day that they thought they had any of them lived through. Its leaden hours appeared interminable. The sun was hot, the air heavy and thunderous, and their thirst raged within them like an unslakable fire, which their small allowance of water seemed to increase, rather than diminish.

Night came at last, a night monotonous as the day had been. Frank could not sleep; he thought of his mother, and his heart reproached him that of late he had been so taken

up with his own affairs as to have had little time to devote to memory and her. Now her gentle image came and stood beside him in those sleepless night watches, and comforted him.

Then morning came, bright and cloudless, a glorious day to the free world outside, a depressingly monotonous one to the weary watchers within.

About mid-day Nell created a slight diversion, and roused a faint glimmer of excitement, if not of hope.

'Yonder is a cloud !' she cried ; ' far away yonder, over the top of that clump of cedars. If it would but come a drenching shower of rain we might catch some water—it would be a luxury to get wet, at least.'

'A cloud, or rather clouds there are,' said O'Brien. 'It is refreshing even to watch them. A heavy shower of rain would be very welcome, Nell ; there is no denying that.'

'But will it come?' said the more observant Winnie. 'I am afraid the clouds keep too high. Father, look at them, dear ; there is no judge of the weather like you !'

'I reckon there will no good come out of it for us, gal,' muttered the old man, laying down his head upon his hands again.

About two Nell gave a shout of triumph.

'You good folks would not believe me,' she cried, 'but I am right after all ; I felt a drop on my face just now. Come, Winnie, let us get our stock of pails ready to catch the heaven-sent rain !'

With a sad smile Winnie obeyed, and they had soon a formidable regiment of cans and pitchers, placed at every available point where the smallest run of water could be expected.

'Now,' said Nell, 'we are ready.'

Poor girl ! she could scarcely repress her tears at the meagre result of all her expectations : three or four big drops pattered down, and then the sun shone out again, and all was bright, cloudless, serene as before.

'I am afraid this attempt at a shower is a sign of a pro-

longed drought,' said Frank ; 'at least, so the Scotch shepherds say.'

'Water! water!' cried the old man, in a weak voice; 'I am stifling.'

'Suppose,' said O'Brien, 'we have a drink all round?—the disappointment has made me furiously thirsty, for one.'

'I don't know if it is prudent,' said Winnie. 'But her suggestion was over-ruled, and a pint of water was distributed among them, reducing the store to five pints.'

'Ah, it is delicious!' sighed O'Brien; 'I never enjoyed a glass of champagne half so much.'

'Hunger makes the best sauce, they say,' said Frank, 'and, I suppose it's much the same with thirst, which I think is the more intolerable sensation of the two.'

'Water bring dis shild to life again,' sighed Pompey, who for the last few hours had been curled together like a ball in a dark corner, where he lay speechless and motionless.

'Let us examine the well once more,' said O'Brien, rising.

'It's no use,' said Frank.

'It's always something to do,' rejoined his companion. 'Come along,' and they went down to the courtyard to inspect the dried up well.

It was in a small cavern, whether natural or scooped out by man they could not determine. A flight of rough steps cut in the earth gave access to it.

'There it is,' said Frank; 'look at it for yourself—it is as destitute of all trace of water as if it had been dry for years.'

'Do you know,' said O'Brien, 'long ago in Ireland I had a friend, almost as dear and close a chum as you are, Blake, but not quite; and he used to make my blood creep by a description he once gave me of a scene he came across in Arabia—a caravan that had perished of thirst. The long train of skeletons, camels, and men, half-entombed in the drifting sand, with the old dried leather bottles that had once held water lying beside the white, nerveless bony hands. I declare to you the sight haunts me now; it is seldom absent

from my mental vision ; I see it even when I am looking at Nell's bonny face, or listening to her pleasant voice.'

Nell ! it was always Nell with him ; why could he not be frank ? When circumstances, in spite of themselves, had created such a confidence between them, why could he not say honestly out, 'I am Winnie's betrothed,' ?

The words were on Frank's lips, but he did not say them. After all, it was O'Brien's own secret, and if he wished to preserve it, he, Frank, was bound to respect it ; so what he did say was about the unfortunate travellers who had experienced a fate so similar in most respects to what theirs bade fair to be. 'Only, I suppose,' he concluded, 'that when all is over with us, or perhaps before it is all over, we shall have the savages and their scalping-knives upon the scene.'

O'Brien made no reply, and they went in to supper. It was a sad, sombre meal—even Nell did not speak ; and the few mouthfuls they swallowed they forced themselves to eat. O'Brien's appetite had failed at last, and as for poor Pompey, he wept silently.

'God alone knows the future,' said Frank, 'but our prospects seem to me very black indeed.'

Old Ike groaned. 'The riptyles have fairly treed us !' he said.

'I admit the fact,' said O'Brien. 'We are as neatly trapped as ever was mink or martin. I wonder if the poor brutes have anything like our feelings ?—they won't suffer as much, at least, from tormenting fears for the future as we do.'

At that moment the two girls, who were sitting together in the twilight, near one of the narrow windows, began to sing a simple, common hymn. Both the words and tune were as destitute of poetical or musical ability as they could well be, but they were earnest and solemn, and the fine voices of the sisters, tremulous with emotion, went straight to the hearts of their listeners, and soothed and comforted them ; even Pompey ceased to weep.

'Me tink,' said the poor fellow, 'dat me hear dat same song up in heaven.'

Next day was Thursday.

'Any prospect of rain?' asked O'Brien.

'None,' rejoined Frank.

'De sun is bright, Massa O'Brien, oh so bright!' observed Pompey. 'Me tink dat it be laughing at us.'

'And the riptyles, as Old Ike calls them—I suppose they are doing the same. I say, Blake, just give a look, will you? at the dusky community over the way, and tell me if life goes on there pretty much the same as usual.'

'There seems no material difference,' answered Frank.

'They have been having breakfast.'

'Good; then we shall have breakfast too, although my soul is beginning to loathe solids.'

The meal over, Frank and O'Brien went down to the courtyard, and after pacing about for awhile, sat down side by side under the shade of the cedar tree, and were so fortunate as to fall asleep, thereby escaping the consciousness of some weary hours of inactivity. Fortunately for them there was still something to do. A constant watch had to be kept night and day to prevent the danger of a surprise by the Indians; and in this duty Winnie and Nell insisted in participating, taking the daily watch between them. Hitherto they had experienced the inconveniences without realising much of the sufferings of thirst, but this day they began to endure frightful misery. At dinner a small portion of water, which seemed beyond all price in their eyes, was apportioned out by Winnie to each, and each, according to his several temperament, swallowed it at a draught, or slowly gloated over it, moistening his parched lips from time to time with a few drops. After dinner, Blake and O'Brien were again together.

'I see my friends of the caravan,' said the latter, 'very plainly—I could even count the ribs in the fleshless camel just beside me.'

Frank made no answer; thoughts of home, of his mother, of his boyhood, of a mossy well in the orchard, from which

he used to like to drink on his way to and from school, filled his brain. He sat for hours thinking of them, with his head clasped between his hands, deaf to all outward sight or sound, till it began to grow dark, and then he rose, and looked round him. O'Brien lay by his side, to all appearance so exhausted that he felt sorry for him—the first kindly impulse he had been conscious of towards him since the night when he made the discovery so fatal to his own hopes.

'You look tired, comrade,' he said; 'I will take the watch for you to-night, although it is not my turn.'

'Thank you, Blake; you have a kind heart, whatever may be said of your temper. I—— Oh! what is this?' and seized with sudden faintness, he staggered, and would have fallen, had Frank not caught him.

In a few minutes he regained partial consciousness.

'I have been ill,' he murmured. 'Is it you, mother—or—or Nell?'

'It is neither,' said Frank, with an effort; 'it is only Frank Blake, your friend. Do you feel better now, Denis?'

'Yes, it was only a momentary weakness; it is over.'

'Lean on me, and I will help you in.'

'It is not necessary. I feel quite strong, and I must prove my strength—for do you know, Blake, I have made up my mind to something?'

'I suppose so—so have I; you mean death—all of us, even the two girls, must, I think, have made up our minds to that.'

'No; I mean to make one last effort to save one dearer than life. You must have seen—eh?'

'Yes, I have seen,' said Frank hastily interrupting him, and feeling as if he were choking. 'What is your plan?'

'A simple one—to go down to the river and bring some water to save her from the miseries of this horrible, lingering death.'

'Your life will be sacrificed.'

'I know that; I lay my account with that, but she will be saved!'

‘For a few hours longer, perhaps. I honour your brave heart, Denis, but this is madness. It is out of the question.’

‘At least, it can hurt only myself.’

‘And her—how can you forget that?’

‘Anything is better than these tortures; but I will wait another day. Desperate as our situation is, something may turn up.’

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE APACHE CHIEF.

‘I am armed,
And dangers are to me indifferent.’

ALONE at his post, Frank considered the scheme.

‘Nothing will come of it,’ he thought, ‘nothing; but at least he shall not go alone.’

Concealed in the thick scrub, he watched almost mechanically the moonlit forest and the quiet hills beyond, on which a silence brooded so deep and lonely that it was difficult to believe they had ever re-echoed to the hideous war-whoop, or to the groans of the dying. Then there was a sudden change—it was so slight that he could scarcely say the silence was disturbed; but he had a curious feeling, as if another human being were near him. Instinctively his finger moved to the trigger of his rifle, and his eyes to a spot where the thick bushes moved a little, as if swaying in a light breeze. The next moment an Indian warrior in paint and feathers rose



‘An Indian warrior in paint and feathers rose before him in the moonlight.’

[Page 251.]

before him in the moonlight, and stood motionless as a bronze statue. He had no rifle, but a bow and arrow dangled loosely from one hand.

With something of contempt for this savage weapon, Frank checked himself in the very act of firing, and contented himself with watching his dusky foe, who, after glancing all around him, advanced a few steps and said, in a deep guttural voice :

‘Where is the pale-face chief? the Bounding Buffalo of the Apaches would say a few words with him,’ and, as he spoke, he threw his bow and arrow on the ground with an easy, lordly air of confidence.

Frank rose the same instant.

‘Here I am,’ he said. ‘What has the Bounding Buffalo of the Apaches to say to the white man?’

‘Words few but weighty. The Great Spirit gave this land to his red children—it was theirs to hold till he came again; the old white man came and seized it; he is greedy for land, greedy for gold; he fights often, many of the Apaches die. Then he makes this fort, and the Apaches laugh in their wigwams at the old white chief’s cunning, old head—young mind. The Apache knows, for his eyes see far, that the fountain of the fort is sealed, the veins of the pale-face chief run dry, and his heart is parched for want of sap?’ This was said in a slightly interrogative tone, which put Frank upon his guard.

‘Who told the Bounding Buffalo of the Apaches,’ he answered gravely, ‘that the veins of the white men run dry? The sap of courage is still in their hearts, and the vigour of strength in their arms. They can still defend what the Great Spirit has given them; but the Great Spirit did not mean his white and red children to live in enmity and strife. He made his woods large for the red man; he made his fields fertile for the white.’

‘Ugh!’ exclaimed the Indian, as if in sudden disgust. ‘Are the Apaches spirits? Can they live in the tops of the

sounding pine trees? can they follow the chase in the rolling clouds? That is all of their old hunting-grounds the pale-faces have left them. They trap the beaver on the lakes; they frighten the buffaloes from their old haunts, and yet my brother says the Great Spirit made the woods for his red children! My brother is wise. Some of the red men are wise also; they say the pale-face chief is no woman; he comes from over the great lake. Let him and his little brother go. They are not friends of the old man, although his wigwam has covered them, and they have sat around his fire. Let them go before the morning star has risen; the trail is clear and plain—although they have not the nose of an Apache, they will scent it through the woods and over the prairies. Leave the old man to the Bounding Buffalo; his scalp will hang on a pole. The Bounding Buffalo will dry it by the smoke of his fire, and the daughters of the pale-face will smile in the wigwam of a chief.'

Frank felt his blood run cold at this announcement; but he controlled all sign of feeling, and answered calmly:

'The Bounding Buffalo has spoken plainly. It is good. I also will speak plainly. It may be Indian gratitude to sit in a man's wigwam, and warm one's self at his fire, and then leave him to his fate, but that is not the way in which white men act. I and my brother will fight for the man whose bread we have eaten, and whose roof has covered us.'

'And will the other pale-faced warriors echo my brother's words?' asked the Indian.

Frank could not restrain a start of surprise. They did not know, then, of the defection of Joe Winter and his party, and it was evidently not his part to enlighten them.

'Does my brother think,' he said, 'that the pale-faced chief will suffer his warriors to go each upon his own war-path, and talk each with his own tongue?'

'Your heart is stout, chief of the pale faces, but the blood of your braves is thin. You have spoken, and the Bounding Buffalo has heard; but his braves lie low, like pine-trees

stricken down in the forest. They cannot travel alone to the happy hunting-grounds of the Great Spirit. I have spoken; my brother has heard.'

'I have heard, and I have also spoken, and the Bounding Buffalo has heard the words that fell from my lips. I and my people are of one mind. We will do our endeavour to hold this fort to the end.'

Silently the Indian stooped, and with the graceful dignity of a monarch, lifted his bow and arrow, and glided away into the forest as noiselessly as he had come. Frank looked after him for a moment, and then squatted down again to his comfortless watch.

In the morning every one looked very ill. O'Brien, in particular, seemed a prey to restless excitement, and moved continually from one place to another. As for the two girls, they endured their tortures uncomplainingly, although their lips and tongues were so swollen that they could scarcely speak. Frank said little, but contented himself with attending to the old man and to Pompey, who were both slightly delirious, and glared around with feverish eyes, which glittered with an inextinguishable longing. From time to time the old man uttered wild cries, while Pompey gnawed at his fingers, as if seeking to assuage his thirst with his own blood.

Towards evening both fell into a lethargic stupor—it could scarcely be called sleep. Stretched out as if already dead, they lay, with closed eyes and swollen lips apart, breathing loudly.

Then symptoms of madness seized the two girls. Winnie screamed hoarsely, and threw herself on the floor, and writhed and struggled, and tossed herself about in her great agony, while Nell looked at the jug which held all the water that was left to them. An overmastering desire gleamed in her haggard eyes.

'I must! I must!' she muttered, and made her way towards it, with a stealthy, uncertain step, which reeled through weakness. Casting a fearful glance round, she stretched out

her hand towards it, when her arm was gently but firmly seized by O'Brien.

'My dear, you must not,' he said. 'It would not be right. It would not be fair to Winnie.'

She threw herself on her knees, crying and sobbing piteously.

'But I am dying,' she pleaded, 'and this raging fire within devours me. Give me a drop, only a drop, for the love of heaven !'

O'Brien wept with her, but he still held the jug beyond her reach, till Frank interfered.

'Give half of it to her, and hand me the remainder, and I will give it to Winnie,' he said ; and stooping, he tenderly raised the head of the suffering girl, who was fast sinking into the stupor in which her father and Pompey lay. At the sound of his voice, full of unwonted kindness, she opened her soft brown eyes, and fixed them on him with a look of glad surprise, as she murmured, in reply :

'No ; drink yourself, first ! You need it much more than I do.'

To satisfy her, he raised the cup to his lips, and devoured the contents with his eyes. An impulse of almost uncontrollable longing seized him ; but, strong, like O'Brien, in his power of self-sacrifice, he put it from him, and held the untasted cup to the cracked, swollen lips of the still beautiful Rose of the Wilderness. With a smile of gratitude, she finished it to the last drop, and then sank down again upon the floor. Staggering across the room, Nell crouched down by her side.

'I feel shrivelling up,' she moaned.

That was a terrible night ; and in the grey dawn of the morning O'Brien came close up to Frank.

'I can bear it no longer,' he said, in a hoarse whisper. 'Come what will of it, I am going to make an attempt to get water.'

Frank no longer opposed him. What could be worse than this ?

'What have you got to carry it in?' he said.

'Look here—this will do,' said O'Brien, pointing to a stone jar with a bung in it, which would hold about two gallons.

'Yes, that will do; and this is as good a time as any—let us go.'

'Are you really going with me?'

'Yes.'

Nothing more was said, and they set out at once, carrying the jar by turns, getting on without difficulty, until they came to the spot where the Indian camp barred the way. The fire had burned down to a few smouldering brands; there was a sentinel no doubt, but he was invisible, and with beating hearts they turned aside, making a detour to gain the shelter of a fringe of bushes. They could almost hear the loud beating of their hearts as they stole past, but no one else did; and soon the river was before them—the broad shining river. 'Oh, thank God! thank God!' they murmured. 'Their heads swam, their eyes grew dim, they threw themselves on the bank, they dipped their heads and faces into the limpid water, they drank a long, deep, satisfying draught, and then, mindful of their miserable companions, they filled their jar, and with renewed strength and courage began to retrace their steps.

In silence, and as quickly as possible, they glided up through the underwood, and gained the cover of the bushes which skirted the Indian camp; but it was no longer, as before, sunk in silence—it was alive with dusky figures, rapidly moving to and fro, and with the subdued buzz of voices. On the ridge, indistinctly seen by the grey light of the dawn, stood three or four warriors, who seemed peering anxiously into the gloom, as if searching for what had caused their evident scare.

'Run Blake, run for it!' whispered O'Brien, setting the example.

He was instantly followed by Frank. For a few moments sheer amazement, as it seemed, kept the Indians motionless, and the fugitives gained a few yards in advance. Then

several rifles were discharged after them, the bullets whizzing past their ears, and hurtling through the branches, but wounding neither of them. Despair lent them wings; no stag ever flew before the hounds at a swifter pace. Frank was a little in advance of O'Brien, who still grasped the heavy water jar, and behind, whooping and yelling came, an Indian, the best runner of the Apaches.

Leaping forward, the Indian uttered a terrific whoop, and hurled the small axe he carried at the flying figures before him. The intention was good, not so the aim, the weapon hurled through the air, glanced obliquely at the trunk of a tree that stood near, rebounded, and struck O'Brien on the back of the head, a blow severe enough to stun but not to kill him. With a yell of triumph the Indian darted forward, and Frank who had involuntarily halted, was conscious of a sudden fierce struggle between duty and inclination. There lay the man who had supplanted him, who had taken from him all that made life most desirable. Why should he make any effort to save him? why not leave him to his fate, and trust to time and circumstances to aid him in regaining the heart of which he had been robbed? 'No, no!' cried his better nature. 'Save him! Save him! Sacrifice your own life, if need be, but save him for her, so she shall be content, and you, dying to secure her happiness, will feel not quite unblest.'

All these conflicting thoughts flashed through his brain with the swiftness of lightning; the battle was fought and won in a moment, but it was severe while it lasted. He had no arms, but instinctively he caught up the axe which lay at his feet, and hurled it back at the savage, who was about to stoop over the prostrate body of his comrade. It was a bow drawn at a venture, but it sped on its deadly errand with as unerring certainty as the arrow which of old found its way through the joints of the harness of the Israelitish king; the missile glanced through the air like a bolt of lightning, and striking the Indian, sank to the hilt in his heart. Without

even a groan he fell to the ground with a dull crash, and Frank, who was as strong and athletic as a young giant, flung the slight form of his friend across his own stalwart shoulders, and seizing the precious jar of water, continued his flight thus heavily burdened.

The forest fortress stood on a hill, not a very steep one, but still with sufficient of a climb to make the ascent painfully laborious to one struggling for life. In spite of his utmost efforts he was compelled to slacken his speed, his heart beat painfully, his chest rose and fell in tumultuous heaves, and his heart throbbed, as if it were about to burst with each gasping pant. He was within a few yards of the palisades, and his whole soul went out in an unspoken prayer for help. Nearer and nearer came his pursuers, his ears were deafened with their savage yells, they were gaining upon him fast—a few strides more, and the foremost runners would be upon him. Painfully he strained every nerve; he was right opposite the cedar tree, and they were between him and the gate. All was lost for him, but much was saved for friendship and love. With something of care, even amid his desperate haste, he placed the precious jar of water in a cleft of the massy bole of the cedar, and laid O'Brien's still insensible body on one of the thick drooping branches, and gave it a gentle push and it slipped down inside the fence. It was all he could do for him; surely he would be found by Winnie or some one, or at the worst revive by himself, lying there on the cool ground in the shade. The next moment he was fighting for his life, the next desperately wounded, panting, bleeding, helpless in the hands of his savage tormentors. Lying on the trampled grass, he cast a wistful farewell glance up at the log fortress; and then, as he lay along the ground, he could not help watching with intent anxiety the motions of his captors. When would his last moment come? where would the fatal blow fall? or would they use the scalping knife first? Their will seemed just at the moment to proceed to neither extremity. A few words were spoken which he did not

this time to-morrow that will matter little,' and then he thought, half with pathetic self-compassion, half with manly and uncomplaining fortitude, that there was no one to regret him greatly except his poor old mother; and bitter as her grief would be, and heart-wearing the pangs of her suspense until she knew the worst, in the course of nature it could not last long. He would not return to her, but she would go to him; and long years afterwards, when his bones were bleaching in the wilderness, Winnie and O'Brien, seated round their cosy hearth, with the wild winds howling outside, might tell their children the short sad story of the death of the trapper of Cedar Creek, and remember somewhat of the debt they owed him. He dwelt much on this thought, and felt pleasure in it. He could not bear to think that his sacrifice might have been in vain—that O'Brien might never awake to conscious life, or only awake too late to save those he loved. He rather pictured them to himself as happy and united, prosperous and at rest, and experienced a melancholy pleasure in thus contemplating their future. Then his thoughts went back to his mother. It was about the time when she usually retired to rest. Even then, far away, kneeling beside the great gloomy, hearse-like bed he remembered so well, she might be praying for him. An ineffable sense of peace and composure filled his whole soul. His eyes, fixed on the starlit heavens, seemed to pass beyond their luminous depths into the life immortal. Learned men and philosophers, he thought, have been full of curious speculations as to its nature, and scope, and ends. To-morrow, more wise than the greatest living philosopher, he should know all, and feel again the grasp of his dead father's hand and hear his loving voice.

'Prisoner tired—want rest,' said a voice near him, 'but his ears open. There is a band round his heart which binds him to the Rancho of Los Pablos.'

'How do you know that?' said the prisoner, turning with a start to see an old, bent hag, with an armful of pine splin-

ters, some of which she had suffered to fall, and was now stooping to pick up.

'Let the prisoner look away from me,' was the answer, 'and I will tell him. The Whisper of the West Wind is withered and old; she has dwelt long in the wigwam of the white man, and her heart is soft to him and to his daughter, but still she is all Apache at the core, and when the voices of her people called her she could not stay.'

'Are you old Marm Nassick?'

'The pale faces called me that. In their words is little music, but their hearts are soft. I have eaten of their venison—I have sat by their fire; the Rose of the pale faces was to me like the daughter of my youth. Can I see her wither in her pride like the green branch of the hemlock when the worm is gnawing at its roots?'

'Certainly not,' said Frank, altogether unable as yet to comprehend her drift, and not in the least expecting any substantial aid from such a quarter.

'So I went—I, the Whisper of the West Wind, as soon as the camp was pitched yesterday, and I spoke in the ear of the daughter of the pale faces words of fire, and she answered me like the daughter of my soul;' turning, she added, in a soft, low tone, 'Child of my heart, the Whisper of the West Wind has spoken,' and, stooping down assiduously over her splinters, she formed a screen, behind which a young, lithe graceful figure glided to the prisoner's side.

'Frank Blake,' said a voice, whose low melodious tones proclaimed Winnie Taylor. 'Frank, I have come to save you!'

'You! Oh, Winnie, you have done a most imprudent thing! You have sacrificed your own life, or your liberty, for a mere impulse of generosity. You can do nothing to help me!'

'I am not sure of that,' said the girl firmly. 'Joe Winter did not desert us for good, as he perhaps intended; he has come back with a considerable party. The Indians know

that, and so they must hurry through the dreadful programme of to-morrow as quickly as possible. With the earliest glimmer of dawn they will begin. Fortunately for us, you are to be tried first with the ordeal of the race, because you are so seriously wounded as to render any chance of success in their opinion impossible, and because they expect a great deal of amusement from watching your helpless and frantic efforts for life and freedom.'

'God's will be done!' said Frank.

'Amen!' echoed the girl; 'but in moving them to this He is showing us mercy, and opening a chance of escape. The odds, they think, are so hopelessly against you, that you will be allowed a good start. Half-a-mile from here in a straight line across a comparatively open piece of country is the broad and rapid Apanak river. At a point that I know well, it narrows down at a rocky passage between two rocks to such a tiny thread, that I have leapt it, and can leap it again. They will not follow, because they dare not; it is not in their country, and besides, only few of them could take the leap; and even if they made up their minds to try it, before the minutes wasted in hesitation and irresolution were half told, I should be safe. As for you—you must take my clothes and give me yours, and start at once. Old Marm Nassick here will guide you safely out of the camp and set you on the trail. What do you say to this?'

'That my life is not of sufficient value to cost you even an hour of danger, Winnie; besides, what will O'Brien say?—has he given his consent to this mad enterprise?'

'I never asked him for it; he is nothing to me except my sister's betrothed, my friend for Nelly's sake—nothing more.'

'But I saw him with you, surely, down beside the river the night I skated down from Cedar Creek.'

'It was Nell—not me. You know his teasing way. He had made some bet or other that you would not be able to

tell the difference between us, as was indeed unlikely—regarding us both, as you did, with eyes of indifference.’

‘Oh, Winnie! can you forgive me? and I have been so cold, so irritable, so—so—— I have behaved like a brute!’

‘I did think you a little unfriendly,’ she admitted.

‘But it all proceeded from love to you, I am sure you see that, and I—oh, Winnie!—I am so happy now.’

‘I am happy, too,’ she answered in quiet, contented tones. ‘And now, Frank, you will live for my sake—you will let me help you; you won’t let your pride condemn us both to utter misery.’

What could he do but yield; he pressed one kiss upon her pure forehead, and in a few minutes was making his painful way through the hemlock scrub, a free man once more, but a very anxious one, striking out through the dim star-lighted woods in the direction of the Rancho of Los Pablos.

Several times he turned and listened, but all was silent. His mind was full of fearful brooding fancies. He reproached himself for having given way to her fond entreaties. Several times he turned and actually walked back a few steps, and then hesitated and turned again. What good would it be to go back? He was bound in honour to do his best to make good his part of the bargain, so he walked on in great bodily suffering, and with a very heavy and anxious heart.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE RACE.

‘Now I’ll outrun the wind.’

MEANWHILE, let us wander back with Frank to where his thoughts were, with Winnie, under the tree to which the prisoner had been bound, and near which the old women, loudly taunting and reviling her the while, had already begun with many mysterious rites and ceremonies to kindle a fire. A heap of pine splinters lay near; and the girl, who was familiar with every tale of Indian cruelty rampant on the frontiers, knew well the purpose for which they were meant; but strong in her self-devotion, and confident of her own power to elude their vigilance, she eyed them with steady and unquivering nerves.

The first glimmer of dawn was now brightening the morning sky; the women suddenly ceased their taunts and yells, and in the silence which succeeded the storm of words, the warriors, erect and stately, marched with grave decorum upon the scene. All were silent; but the light of the fire, as it flared up against their dark countenances, showed a secret expectation and furtive relish of the coming spectacle. At last the chief broke silence in words whose covert irony was keenly appreciated by every Indian present.

‘Chief of the pale faces,’ he said, ‘my young men think that you can run faster than the swift-footed caribou, and leap further than the bounding panther. They have a mind to try how fast and how far the young brave of the pale-faces can run.’

The prisoner, as might indeed have been expected in the circumstances, made no reply to this taunt.

'Hugh!' exclaimed another warrior. 'The white man is not a great chief—he is weaker than a woman. He keeps in his voice, that he may waste it when our women torment him in the wailings of a maiden. Let the women take this hog of a pale-face, and place him beneath the withered oak on the plain; our young men are swifter than the bounding elk—they will soon overtake this slow-footed trapper of the mink.'

A party of women now advanced, among whom was the old Indian woman who had so long lived at Pablo Rancho. Surrounding the prisoner, who took care to walk with the slow, halting step of a man who was almost disabled, they led her to the withered oak.

Here she stood for a moment, collecting all her energies, and then bounded off swift as an arrow from a bow. She had an advantage to start with, and the confusion and dismay which ensued among the Indians when they observed the startling pace of the prisoner, whom they had supposed desperately wounded, favoured her still more. Several rifles were discharged at her, but with such an uncertain aim that the bullets whizzed harmlessly past, while she, profiting by every moment of delay, steadily increased the distance between them.

At last the rifles were thrown aside, and the fleetest runners started on what they perceived was to be a real trial of speed, and not a sham race.

On they sped, in almost a direct line, across the broken plain, the Indians whooping wildly as they ran, and one after another dropping discomfited out of the hopeless race, till, when the rocky, precipitous banks of the river came in view, only one of the Apaches was in sight of the fleet-footed prisoner. She had struck the river precisely at the right point, and now paused to get breath before she attempted her last desperate leap. She had nothing to fear from the Indian behind her, unless he overtook her. He could not have run as he had done if he had been encumbered with arms of any description.

As soon as she had recovered breath a little, she ran back a few paces. The Indian, at this, uttered a cry, half of triumph, half of surprise, when she sprang forward, and like a dove light poised on airy wings, vaulted right over the yawning gulf. The Apache followed, making a rush with tremendous velocity; but falling short of the required leap, he struck against the rocky wall of the chasm, and went whirling down headlong into the foaming abyss below. As for Winnie, she ran a few yards farther, and then stopped to rest herself a little. Now that she was safe, and that the stimulus to exertion was over, she realised what a frightful effort she had made. Her whole body ached. She felt as if she could scarcely stir a limb, she even began to shudder at the risks she had run, which she had thought so little of when buoyed up by the supreme excitement of saving Frank. Now that she had accomplished her purpose, she felt weak, weary—absolutely exhausted. Lying on the cool, green grass beneath the shade of a friendly cedar, and screened from observation by a fringe of bushes, she saw one Indian after another come up to the platform of rock, and cautiously examine the ground in their usual minute way. She could easily gather from their gestures that they had tracked her trail to the very edge of the cliff, and had satisfied themselves both as to her sex and the manner of her escape; although from their loud exclamations of wonder it was clear that the transmutation of their prisoner into a woman was still an unsolved problem to them. Then comparative silence succeeded, and they separated and went here and there, hunting about like so many sleuth-hounds up and down the river-banks. Then a succession of yells filled the startled air—they had discovered in one of the quiet pools below the body of their companion, and their cries were so full of savage fury that they terrified her. Fear now lent her the strength which she had before derived from her loving devotion, and she rose and pursued her long and arduous journey through the woods, filled with many fears and doubts as to Frank's

ultimate safety. He was so weak that he might not have been able to accomplish the distance to Pablo Rancho. He might even now be lying insensible in the woods, and might fall a second time into the hands of the Apaches.

When her leap was safely accomplished and she had first sunk down panting and exhausted behind the friendly screen of bushes on the other side of the river, she had had a few moments of pure unalloyed happiness. The goal seemed won, the future spread in rosy hues before her; but now anxious care again seized her fluttering heart in its clutches. What she had done seemed to her unassuming nature simple enough; what troubled her was that it might prove all too little to save him, and she had a very miserable time of it until she arrived at the forest fortress.

Nell met her at the door, and threw her arms round her neck.

'He is here,' she whispered, with the ready sympathy of affection; 'and oh, Winnie, I am proud of you—I never thought you could have done such a thing! I could not have done it to save my life. Lean on me. Are you tired, dear?' but no answer came, and Winnie fell heavily against her sister in a dead swoon.

CHAPTER XXVI.

‘A HEAVEN ON EARTH I’VE WON BY WOOLING THERE.’

Picture to yourself, kind reader, a couple of farms, two of the finest ever reclaimed from the western wilderness, comprising several acres of land in the alluvial bottom of a small stream. Potatoes and other vegetables, with wheat and barley, cover the fertile fields. Each has a farm-house, very much alike—a large brown erection of wood, with projecting eaves and quaint windows, which are garlanded with wreaths of cool vine leaves, and are gay with the flowers of clambering creepers. Across the valley, a broad stretch of forest glows in the red light of sunset; the crimson flush deepens between the tall stems of the pines, and touches the long undulations of the straggling fir-wood with gleams of fire; up the rough track a waggon is slowly toiling, and sweet as a June rose amid the roses blossoming around her, a young woman is standing in a watchful expectant attitude. A handsome lithe young woman, with bright healthy complexion, a kindly intelligent face, and large clear frank eyes, which look into your inmost soul. She is no stranger; you have seen her before—once she was Winnie Taylor, now she is Winnie Blake. Behind her is a sparkling face framed in by a wreath of vine leaves, a brighter more vivacious image of herself—her sister Nell, now Denis O’Brien’s wife—and Denis himself speaks from the interior of the house:

‘Winnie, this is the tenth time I have asked you for some cream which Pompey wants for the bread sauce, and you take no more notice of me than if I were that innocent pair of prairie chickens which are almost done to a turn; but I forgive you! I have to practise that virtue so very much now,

that I do it without an effort. I forgive you, I forgive everybody and everything.'

'You dreadful wretch, do you know that I have a good mind to box your ears?' and Nell sprang back to him, her sunny face irradiated with a smile of happy content.

Then the waggon drove up to the gate and Winnie ran out, and a slender tearful old lady was helped down with great care by Frank Blake.

'This must be Winnie!' she said, dropping into her arms, 'God bless you, my dear!'

'Yes, I am Winnie,' said Frank's wife, 'and right glad I am to welcome you to his house, dear mother, and I will try to be a good daughter to you, and a loving,' and with that she threw her arms round the old lady's neck and kissed her, and the old lady clung to her, trembling and sobbing and crying out:

'You must excuse me, my dear. Brother Benjamin always said I was a great fool, but I need not have come all the way from Scotland to make a fool of myself here.'

'Which it's my himpression, marm, that you have never done,' said a short, thick-set, elderly man of respectable appearance, who spoke thickly into his neckcloth, as if he and that variegated article of many colours had secrets which could not be imparted to all the world. The old lady looked startled, but Mr. O'Brien, advancing from the rear, hastened to introduce Old Ike and himself. 'This is Mr. Taylor, to whose generosity Frank and I owe these very substantial locations, and I am Denis O'Brien, at your service, madam.'

'Frank's friend,' said the tearful old lady; and then she turned fondly to a fair face that was smiling gently upon her, and repeated softly, as if she never could be weary of repeating the name—'and this is Winnie, Frank's wife.'

'No, no!' said O'Brien gravely; 'this is Nell, my wife. Stupid as Frank is, he is not fool enough to go in for Mormonism.'

And then they all had a laugh round, for happy people are easily amused, and in the midst of their merriment Pompey stalked out, solemn and dignified, with a wisp of a white napkin over his arm.

‘Massa O’Brien,’ he said, ‘and all de oder ladies and gentlemen, de supper waits.’

And what a supper that was! Pompey, better supplied with kitchen requisites than at Cedar Creek, had outdone all his previous efforts; even O’Brien, in a pause of the conversation, was heard to declare ‘that it was the jolliest supper he had ever eaten in his life.’

THE END.

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